

# **Narrative Participation within Game Environments: Role-Playing in Massively Multiplayer Online Games**

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# **Narrative Participation within Game Environments: Role-Playing in Massively Multiplayer Online Games**

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# Summary

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) present fantastic, persistent worlds and narratives for a community of players to experience through pre-defined rules, roles, and environments. To be able to offer the opportunity for every player to try the same experiences, many game developers have opted to create elaborate virtual theme parks: scripted experiences within static worlds that cannot be affected or changed through player actions.

Within these games, some players have turned to role-playing to establish meaningful connections to these worlds by expanding upon and subverting the game's expectations to assume a limited sense of agency within the world. The interaction between role-players and the locations they occupy within these worlds is a notable marker of this narrative layering; specific locations inform social codes of conduct, designed by developers, and then repurposed by players for their characters and stories. Through a qualitative case study in *World of Warcraft* on public role-playing events, this thesis considers how the design of in-game locations inform their use for role-playing, and how locations are altered through storytelling as a result.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

In deciding how to act within a social situation, the location in which the situation arises will influence how we act. This human behavior can be seen in our everyday lives, but also extends to virtual locations, though we do not occupy them physically. Video games present fantastic worlds and narratives that frame player expectations while immersing them within alternate realities; the rules that govern a game constrain the player's actions according to the game's paradigm.

Public and communal locations in networked virtual environments, such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs, or MMOs for short), are considerably more complicated than single-player games, since they must negotiate a community of players acting concurrently within the same persistent game world. With the addition of a community comes the societal expectation to adhere to codes of conduct. These are dictated by location and situation, as in our real lives, but also by the constraints and narratives that designers have embedded within artificially bounded environments. These worlds are **static**: that is, they cannot change or be affected by any action done by the players. As a result, a player might traverse a virtual theme park in their day-to-day play, moving through scripted experiences. Meanwhile, another player coming through will move through the same scripted experiences, the scenarios playing out as if that character was the first to come across the scenario – the world largely persists in a constant state, impervious to player actions.

MMO role-players establish a meaningful connection with these worlds by both



expanding upon and subverting the designers' expectations; this form of emergent behavior allows players to take possession of this world as their own. The interaction between players and the environments that surround them – particularly in public contexts – within these worlds is one of the most visible markers of this narrative layering, as specific locations inform codes of conduct that have been designed, and then repurposed or subverted. These locations become complex social spaces through player interactions.

Through a qualitative case study in *World of Warcraft* on public role-playing events, this thesis explores the following central research question: How does the design of an in-game location inform its use as a storytelling tool for players, and how does this reflect and alter a location in return?

There are many questions to consider about the relationship between player activities and specific locations in the environment. How does the design of the environment (i.e. level design, art direction, sound, presentation of content) influence player behavior? How is a narrative built into a location? How and why do players subvert the design intentions behind an environment? What architectural traits are players looking for when they choose one location over another location for role-playing?

This thesis is divided into five chapters, which are as follows:

Chapter 1 consists of a brief introduction to role-playing in MMOs and its relevance and effect on the world around it. As well, this section presents the questions

that this study and thesis will be addressing.

Chapter 2 provides context on the topic of role-playing as a situated and collaborative vehicle for storytelling, as well as a brief history of the evolution of MMORPGs from their digital and analog antecedents. The former will be further broken down into roles and environments, where real-world situations, as considered through sociology and urban architecture respectively, will be presented alongside existing research within game studies.

Chapter 3 details the methodology behind the ethnographic study itself, including the steps required to submit this research protocol, the research itself, and the steps I took to organize and examine the data after.

Chapter 4 covers the findings from the ethnographic study conducted, as described in the previous chapter. The chapter offers an overview of the results and its place within the existing literature, before examining each location covered in the study as the players in this study used them.

Following this will be the conclusion, which contains my final remarks and future expansions for this work.

## Chapter 2: Context

In considering player appropriation of static game environments for role-play, it is relevant to consider how role-players read, experience and use these environments to tell stories. This section draws upon sociology and game studies to create a framework through which to consider and understand the findings from the ethnographic study.

### Defining Role-Play

At its most basic level, role-playing is the assumption and performance of a particular role. This broad definition can be applied to everyday life, as Erving Goffman does in *Behaviors in Public Places*: the “social order...defined as the consequence of any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons pursue objectives...[where] within each such order, mere behavior is transformed into a corresponding type of conduct” (8). Social expectations dictate what codes of conduct are appropriate, and from these codes, the individual derives a complex set of guidelines to create and assume a particular role, and then to perform accordingly. This role, in turn, is but one of several roles that an individual has at any point in time to draw from for a given situation; and while these roles are rarely mutually exclusive, each role may call for a different approach to the same situation. For example, a person will conduct herself differently as a friend than as a manager; this person has not lost either role, but depending on the situation, the person will prioritize one role over the other when reacting to a situation. When these roles are in conflict, the person must come to a resolution based on these

priorities, whether that is a switch in roles or (perhaps more often) a compromise between roles. Thus, the person as a friend is more inclined to be lenient about her friend's tardiness as a favor, but the person as a manager is more inclined to be harsh because she is responsible for the success of the meeting itself and being watched by the group in attendance. The decision that this person makes, regardless of what it might be, in turn creates a situation, and the potential for role-switching, for everyone involved: the person, the person's friend, and each of the other group members.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman extends the metaphor of life as a stage performance required to maintain appearance by dividing the perception of an individual into the "performer" and the "character" (23). The performer is the part of the individual creating impressions and performing roles, while the character is the role being performed at the present, or the visible front. In this way, he describes interaction in social situations as a collection of characters being drawn upon to fit a particular situation. Though Goffman is referring to individuals in real life, the differentiation applies equally well to the division in player identities when engaged in role-playing. The "performer" is the out-of-character player, and the "character" is the fictional persona embodied by an avatar that is displayed on the game screen. As he notes concerning the limitations of the theatre metaphor when applied to everyday life:

A character staged in a theatre is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the *successful* staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of *real* techniques — the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. (25)

Role-playing, as defined within the context of this thesis, draws from these same

techniques. Rather than merely sustaining a thoroughly contrived character within this digital environment, though, the participants are engaged in the creation and enactment of fictitious roles within a virtual environment.

*“In a nutshell, all role-playing [is] about imaginary people acting out in an imaginary environment...”* — Markus Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing”

The role-playing that Montola describes – as a form of entertainment which typically takes place within games – differs thematically from the everyday example provided earlier, but the concepts themselves are no less pertinent. Instead of acting as herself specifically, a player within these games assumes the role of a fictional character and performs as this character within a pre-fabricated, fictional setting, often with other players who have also assumed the roles of different characters. This can take place through formalized face-to-face interactions, such as in pen-and-paper role-playing games and live-action role-playing games, or in less formal occasions, such as childhood pretend games.

These types of games create “the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place” within controlled circumstances, which Janet Murray notes can be “pleasurable in itself” (98). The sense of immersion drawn from these games is sustained through “conventions” or rituals, thereby allowing the trance to be sustained without fear of being drawn irrevocably into the fantasy or allowing the fantasy to break under the assertion of disbelief (100). These rituals provide a mental model that creates boundaries between these two worlds, moderating the movement between the two. In this sense, the

fourth wall is not the boundary between the audience and the actors, since audience and actor are one, but the boundary between three different roles: the disengaged person (the person at the computer), the person as player, and the person as character. For the purposes of discussing role-play, it is useful to consider the disengaged person as interacting with the game through the role of the player; both of these roles are situated outside of the boundary. The person then shifts between the role of the player and the role of the character – which is conventionally known amongst the role-playing community as the boundary between in-character (IC) and out-of-character (OOC) play. Although players will work with the same general definitions of in-character and out-of-character play, the individual player will determine the boundaries between the two types of play. For some, the two kinds of play will be largely separate, and for others, the distinction is almost non-existent.

It is useful to briefly consider how role-playing operates within other formats, including tabletop games, text-based games (such as MUDs), live action role-playing games (LARPs), and freeform chat role-playing (including chat rooms and IRC servers), and compare these to MMO role-playing, which has been derived from and inspired by these earlier forms but adapted to the medium of play. Freeform chat role-playing, in particular, can feature a moderator to police player behavior but typically has light or no mechanical system for conflict resolution. The specific differences between these various systems will be addressed in a later section.

Compared to other forms of role-playing, MMOs role-playing operates differently because social interaction has been redirected to relatively unexpressive avatars within a

virtual world and chat text. On one hand, it can be very difficult to draw the distinction between players and their characters because “role-players, who remain in-character while in the game, speak from the voice of their online avatar personae rather than from the voice of a human being at a computer keyboard controlling from behind the scenes” (Squire and Steinkuehler 185). However, the separation between the player and the avatar body of her character can also be enabling, allowing players to more easily experiment with different identities within the anonymity that the game world provides.

## Situating Role-Play

### Avatar Placement

In *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman separates the information being conveyed during social interaction into two categories. Information that is **embodied** "is a message that a sender conveys by means of his own current bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that his body is present to sustain this activity."

**Disembodied** information, on the other hand, "require that the organism do something that traps and holds information long after the organism has stopped informing." (14)

Role-playing, as with many forms of social interaction, can be said to encompass a combination of both embodied and disembodied information. Granted, the majority of a scene must necessarily take place in text, either through speaking within the in-game chat interface or through emotes, though emotes can be disembodied in that the text can

persist beyond the current time, or in the case of custom emotes, the text extends and works around the game's mechanical limitations. Emotes can also be embodied in that many built-in emotes will trigger sounds and animations in the avatar. The avatar itself is an affordance of MMOs that provides a representation of self and a way to express body language. Players use their digital bodies in virtual worlds as “material in the dynamic performance of identity and social life” to establish a presence within the digital world (Taylor, *Avatars* 42). But this is not, she notes, merely based in the existence of the avatar; moving and performing in the virtual world through the avatar reinforces the presence of this digital body to anyone who sees the avatar, including the player herself. For example, with the sense of personal space that players identified in Taylor’s study, players conveyed relationships with other players through their positioning in relation to those players: friends would stand in a cluster together, while a player would move her avatar away from a stranger if the stranger’s avatar was standing too close to hers (43-4). Thus, presence is an embodied activity where the “inscription of self on the space becomes a socially mediated experience”; players ground their presence there within the world by placing their avatars in social settings in relation to others, and interacting through their avatars (44).

Similarly, the participants within a role-playing scene also convey crucial information to outsiders about the scene's context by how they have 'set up' a scene, through various bits of embodied information -- such as the spatial orientation and movement of the avatar. In considering an avatar's spatial orientation, it is useful to further distinguish the staging of a scene by the scene's location, here referring to the



relative positioning of the avatars within the environment, and the virtual environment and the external associations or interpretations therein, the latter of which will be covered in another section.

For the former, consider the scenario of two characters sitting on a bench. If they are sitting facing outward, side-by-side, they will seem to be interacting with each other, but are also watching the events around them, and are (out-of-character, if not in-character) thus more likely to be open to outsiders joining the scene. However, if two characters are seated so that the avatars are facing each other, then the characters are clearly interacting with each other, but are more likely to be ignoring the world around them. This distinction is what is colloquially known within the role-playing community as 'open' or 'closed' role-play. Open role-play, or walk-up role-play, is characterized by its inclusiveness: often, this kind of scene will have social hooks built into its premise for to allow interested passers-by to freely enter the narrative and interact with others without much fuss or many contrivances to explain the new character's sudden presence. Closed role-play, on the other hand, is often restricted to a particular group of players who have an existing narrative reason to interact with each other; characters outside of the group whose presence is unwanted will either be ignored or turned away.

Goffman categorizes this type of embodied information as **body idiom**, a collection of symbolic "individual appearances and gestures" that make up "embodied expressive signs...[which] function to qualify whatever an individual may mean by a statement he makes to others and thus play[s] a role in the focused interaction of, say, a conversational gathering" (Goffman, *Behavior* 33-4). In everyday life, the mannerisms that a person

adopts, particularly in a public space, help to augment how that person wishes to be perceived, and how others perceive the person. Within the limited confines of a virtual environment, a similar (though more mechanically constrained) vocabulary exists to modify a character's words and actions, entering both the in-character and out-of-character discourse within a scene. To extend the earlier example further, the relationship between two characters in a scene can also be interpreted through the community's body idiom.

The distance between two avatars is itself an expressive sign. If the avatars are touching or almost touching, one implication is that the characters are likely romantically involved (and more so if the avatars are turned to face each other), or at least extremely close. If the avatars are located away from a main thoroughfare or out of the public eye, then the scene is likely to be closed to external interaction. Naturally, this body idiom is open to variations in meaning depending on the specific groups involved, but many of these symbols persist throughout a particular server, as perpetuated by a majority of the community, or across role-playing servers or even outside communities, brought over by players bringing external customs with them when immigrating to a different server.

To the outsider, the avatar's placement in a scene can indicate the narrative context behind the scene and the character's relation to the events currently occurring in that particular place, as well as whether a scene is open or closed to interaction with the public. For example, a group of avatars congregating in an orderly fashion will draw a passerby's attention; such displays, particularly on a role-playing server when along or near a main thoroughfare, are typically unspoken invitations for the public to participate

in the scene. If the same group were to be in a more secluded location, it becomes more difficult to discern whether the scene is open or closed.

## Roles and Separation of Space

The concept of open and closed scenes is certainly not a new idea; in fact, it builds off of the concept of public and private places, where "'public places' refers to any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community; 'private places' refer to soundproof regions where only members of invitees gather..." (Goffman, *Behavior* 9) However, aside from instances<sup>1</sup> of otherwise closed-off locations, which have a limited period of availability for use and a number of mechanical restrictions, the game world in *World of Warcraft* operates as a single public place where any player can access the open world<sup>2</sup>. Players may take advantage of the game's extensive environment to set their closed scenes in more distant or less-frequented locations, where it is less likely to be overheard or found. While other players can still access a location freely, the location may be difficult enough to find that players consider it secure for their purposes. Unlike MUDs, where the "virtual geography of connected 'rooms'" supports public and private rooms, the presence of a continuous rendered space introduces

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<sup>1</sup> Instances are closed areas that players can enter with a limited number of other players, and are so called because multiple copies of the same place exist at the same time without the players in one copy ever seeing the players in another copy. The mechanic is associated with dungeons in *World of Warcraft*, but has also been implemented to display scripted changes (phases) in the environment as players go through quests.

<sup>2</sup> In practice, while any player is technically free to access any location within the game, low-level characters may need assistance or protection from high-level characters to access more 'difficult' areas. This has not stopped role-players from going to these locations for their scene, or even from holding events, as can be seen in the Findings section.

geographic features that allow and encourage players to seek out geographically-bounded locations to serve as makeshift rooms (Mynatt et al. 9).

In lieu of private or semi-private places, MMOs and other networked communities enable different levels of social interaction by offering different channels for communication through text, which players can create and control access to these channels in a limited fashion. To mimic private places, players can communicate one-to-one and many-to-many, which operate independent of location. Developer-created many-to-many chat channels are typically divided by purpose or by zone, but player-created channels are either created within the same framework as the developer-created channels, or are created dynamically as part of the game's grouping system, which can be divided into short-term and long-term groups. Short-term groups include parties and raids, which are temporary groups that can be quickly formed and disbanded; long-term groups, like guilds, require more players to set up and operate as social organizations. Players intending to close off a scene typically resort to private channels, though the channels can also be used as a supplementary means of communication.

On the other hand, say (/say), or the default chat, is a channel that broadcasts within a pre-determined radius of the speaker's avatar to nearby players; within role-playing scenes, this is most often paired with emotes for non-verbal (though still text-based) expressions (Blizzard Entertainment). Unlike the other channels listed above, these two forms of communication are both open to everyone and location-dependent (limited to the area around the avatar), effectively serving as the public places Goffman describes. This is hardly to say that these definitions are absolute -- that all open role-play scenes

will accept anyone who comes by, or that all closed role-play scenes will turn away anyone who isn't part of the group, but players may infer a particular group's openness from the group's location and channel choices.

Amongst individuals involved within an engagement, the concept of containment, or "the obligation of participants to withhold attention from matters occurring outside of the engagement" and focus on their primary engagement can also be relevant to how role-players perceive role-playing scenes (Goffman, *Behaviors* 179). The space outside of the scene is ignored in favor of the dominant engagement to which the player chooses to join, entering the space as her character. In doing so, she agrees to follow that particular group's communication standards when interacting with them within the context of the engagement and contain their actions within the locations set aside for the group's activities. However, the dominant engagement is rarely the only activity going on within any gathering, particularly with large engagements. As Goffman notes in his discussion of engagement disloyalty, participants of a dominant engagement can form a **byplay**, or a "noninclusive engagement that is carried on simultaneously...but in a way carefully calculated not to interfere with it too openly" (181). This can occur more often with large engagements because there are many loyal participants to sustain the dominant engagement over the byplay. Within freeform role-playing, such as that in MMOs, players are more likely to have their characters form byplays when in group events to better tell their own stories because of a lack of a guided storyline or a strong dominant narrative. However, role-players still practice containment when establishing the setting within the game environment and narrative premise for their scenes to establish the

bounds of performance and the frame story, or the narrative premise behind a particular engagement, to the participants and outsiders.

Indeed, without clear bounds and a mutually agreed-upon frame story, role-players lose the supportive framework needed to place their characters within the world. Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler note of the role-playing community in the *Star Wars Galaxies* MMO that “role-players go to great lengths to maintain the integrity of the virtual world while shrouding the mechanical reality” of the systems underlying the game world and the world beyond the game (185). Role-players maintain the integrity of the virtual world, the illusion of reality, because they (through their avatars) and their stories are situated within the world. While the locations that role-players occupy for role-playing are functionally connected to the rest of the virtual world, these locations are also perceived as distinct from the rest of the environment because of its use. This perceived separation within a game world is similar to Yi-Fu Tuan’s distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ within the physical world, noting that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better” (6). The transformation that Tuan describes can thus occur in any space because it comes from a change in perception from the person rather than necessarily a change in the space itself; a place gains meaning for a person through that person’s experience within the place (18). As such, these perceptions, differ depending on the experiences of the individual; as such, one person can see a location and think of it as a landmark entirely while another person could see the same location and think of it as her home because of her experiences with using the space as a home. Virtual environments, such as those in MMOs, can also be experienced

in a more limited sense, but role-players within a play space constrain and are constrained within created imaginary bounds and systemic bounds from a game's rules and mechanics to maintain the believability of these places.

Tuan also notes that space is “that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (6). The pause allows for the creation of experiences; if read as part of a story, this pause allows the space to become a setting where events ‘take place’ at a particular location. Thus, the distinction between locations which operate as role-play settings, or narrative places, and the rest of a game environment, or the virtual space within a game, does not necessarily emerge from designer intent (though the design of a space can certainly influence how a space is perceived and used, as is discussed later), but from players perceiving a space as suitable for pause – for performance.

Space is not only experienced as place, but also transformed in its use to represent and contain different states of mind, or different roles, as exists with role-playing. Victor Turner, in *From Ritual to Theatre*, addresses transitional spaces as they relate to rituals and play. He notes two kinds of transitions, or thresholds: the **liminal** and the **liminoid**. These transitions are “often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another” to symbolize the transition both for the person undergoing the ritual and to onlookers (25). In entering a liminal state, a person first separates himself from space and time into a “sacred space-time,” where he exists outside of the normative social structure; from there, he moves through a rite of passage in order to transition from this state into a stable position within the social structure (27). These

liminal phenomena thus exist within these work-focused normative social structures because they provide methods to facilitate movement within a social structure. Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, resemble the liminal in its separation from social structures, but creates instead a “neutral space,” an “independent domain of creative activity” for play and leisure; as such, these phenomena offer the liberation of a temporary state outside of the normative social structure into which people may opt into willingly (33). They hold away the social structure to create a space for experimentation, creation, and entertainment.

MMOs in the modern era exist as virtual persistent liminoid spaces, offering a mechanically defined and rendered model of an alternate world for their players to visit. However, the concept of the liminoid space can also be applied to role-playing within MMOs. MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* are created almost exclusively by a group of developers who, in hard-coding a ruleset into the game and policing social conduct, assume the role of the dominant authority within the world. Role-players may enter the game world as players, but establish liminoid spaces at locations within the game world for their performances. This allows them to set aside the developer-created constraints and the role of the player to take on and perform as their characters. Role-players acknowledge this separation in their terminology when they define their in-game actions and locations within the game world as either out-of-character or in-character; likewise, the concept of stepping in-character or out-of-character can be conveyed through a text chat announcement, but also by moving one’s avatar in or out of the in-character space.

Another, more flexible, approach to the transition between out-of-character space



and in-character space is through Johan Huizinga's concept of bounds of play, as re-conceptualized by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman into the concept of the '**magic circle**' (95). Huizinga notes that "all play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally or as a matter of course" which are "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10). Much as Turner notes in his concept of the liminoid, play exists in a space that is separated from ordinary life, Huizinga specifically distinguishes the play-ground as one that is bounded according to the structure and rules of the game itself. Salen and Zimmerman borrow Huizinga's example of a magic circle to name this play-ground within games, noting that this magic circle both encloses the space and separates space and time from the flow of ordinary life. Players can choose to step out of the game by crossing the boundary of the magic circle, but suspend their participation within the game as they move out of that space and time into the ordinary world; similarly, players entering into this magic circle adopt a state of mind open to the constraint of and premise behind the circle.

Applied to MMO role-playing, the magic circle can be said to represent the in-character space, while the space outside is the out-of-character space. The area within the magic circle is the in-character space, the role-playing scene; within it, players are able to shape the environment to fit their particular needs, and are able to break from the game's rigid structure to expand on the world and to tell and perform stories beyond the dominant narrative of the transient hero. For example, role-players can establish a magic circle by standing next to the wall of a building and treating it (for the setting of their

scene) as the front stoop of an apartment complex where their characters reside.

However, the concept of a magic circle also implies the presence of explicit rules to define its structure and bounds. The in-character space, in contrast, is typically defined by a set of implicit behavioral guidelines and social conventions to protect the integrity of the imagined roles, performances, and stories without restricting the actions of its participants.

Because the in-character space is constructed and guided primarily through social conventions rather than the game's mechanics, we can consider the separation between in-character and out-of-character space as the separation between different social worlds. A person, as Goffman notes in *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, interprets and understands these social worlds through frames of experience, which "are constructed in accord with principles that govern both the events themselves and participants' experiences of these events" (10-11). As such, a **frame** contains a set of social conventions that apply to a social reality, which guides a person's involvement within that reality. Gary Alan Fine notes that games exemplify the concept of frames, or "finite worlds of meaning" because games can be "engrossing": a player voluntarily blocks out other realms of experiences when her attention is drawn to the game, thus separating this alternate social world and its experiences from the ordinary world (182). With games, a group of players will be jointly engrossed when they engage with the same alternate world. With role-playing, these frames are reinforced by the need to create a fantasy world that is believable enough for participants to enter, and an implicit agreement to "bracket" what is outside of the fantasy world (183).

But these bounds are not concrete or absolute, particularly within MMOs, since these frames remain grounded within the static game environment in which they are set, and require knowledge about frames and of relevant experience acquired outside of the world of the role-playing scene. As well, individuals move between and maintain awareness of several frames at once. For example, a role-player acts the role of her character when participating in a role-playing scene, taking on an identity which is separate from the player's identity. A role-player also assumes the role of the player who is controlling the character; the player consciously manipulates and acts as her character within the constraints of the game's structure and conventions, but may be also aware of information or motivations of which the character is not, for whatever reason, aware. Around these frames is the understanding of how the ordinary world functions. A role-player taking on the persona of a character thus can be said to know how to behave and act based on her experiences living in the ordinary world, her knowledge of the game world's history and technical constraints, and the personality and individual history of the character she has created.

Fine modifies Goffman's model to address the ease with which people "slip in and out of engrossment" within games, noting that players can flicker from frame to frame with relative ease, depending on events that occur during these games (Fine 183). Some of these movements, such as clarifying a character's intention as the player to another player (character to player), are intentional, and can happen even within the same conversation. Within MMOs, this flickering is often mitigated with the use of OOC-specific chat channels to avoid subverting or disrupting a role-playing scene. This

flickering can also occur unintentionally, however, because the individual is managing all of these frames in her mind and thus slippage can occur when one frame is aware of information that another frame should not (190).

Applied to MMO role-playing, these different frames can apply to how players perceive in-character and out-of-character bounds as different frames of experience. Between the person and the player, the representation of the virtual environment and the limited modes of text-based communication can help reinforce the mindset of the player and character frames because there is an easily-identifiable boundary between the ordinary and virtual worlds. Game locations, similarly, can offer a clear delineation between in-character and out-of-character space. For example, a nondescript wall in a city be read as the doorstep to a building as opposed to a ledge on a wall, within the character's frame of experience which acknowledges the general area and willfully dismisses the fact that no doorstep exists, which remains within the player's frame. Frames can thus help to explain how players perceive and appropriate game locations for role-playing, even (or especially) if players cannot meaningfully claim a location, and to what extent players recognize these claims and expect others to recognize their own claims.

However, role-playing is a much more fluid activity than can be addressed solely through the model of frames. As Schechner notes, different levels of experience are not contained in rigid, well-defined frames, which assume that individuals move back and forth quickly between these discrete levels of experience with an, because the crafting of a character or a performance draws from and can be articulated through several

approaches (41). Daniel Mackay calls these levels of experience “porous spheres”, which – unlike the frame model – provides not a role but a layer of expression. These **spheres**, and the activity of role-playing, reside within the much broader sphere of ritual (64-5). In tabletop games, Mackay notes that players draw upon the spheres of narrative (storytelling), play (game mechanics), and acting (performance) to role-play. The sphere model applies variably to MMO role-playing, which has no primary storyteller and thus no script, and has not one cohesive production but a number of smaller performances that can but do not necessarily connect to one another. Thus, an individual might be acting within the frame of her character, but can convey her character through words (text chat), actions (text emotes and basic animations), her avatar’s appearance, attributes and statistics, and positioning within the game environment.

## Role-Play and Constructing Fantasy Worlds

*"When a person visits a place, the stories that are told about it - by companions, by rock art or graffiti, or even by oneself through memories or fantasies - become part of the character of the place. Stories give us ideas about what can be done or imagined in a place; learning that a particular canyon was an outlaw's hiding place, for instance, or remembering a child saying that a particular rock resembled an old woman's face will certainly influence our experience of that place. It's hard to experience a natural place without remembering or constructing some stories about it."* – Brenda Laurel, "Placeholder: Landscape and Narrative in Virtual Environments."

The construction of narrative environments is an integral part of the role-playing experience, though narrative environments themselves exist outside of and predate role-playing games. Celia Pearce notes that narrative spaces have been created by people in power to a variety of ends, such as in tombs or temples; some stories are histories, which can be traced in the buildings and infrastructure of many cities, and some are fictions, such as in theme parks, which contain attractions for their visitors within a highly-controlled, synthetic environment. MMOs in particular have many similarities to theme parks in their use of “spatial storytelling” to create carefully crafted experiences for entertainment, but also offer the potential for “agency, identity, and persistent community” (201). Players can navigate their avatars within the virtual in more ways than within the ordinary world, such as being able to fly freely, providing a limited agency for the avatar. These avatars help players form a persistent identity with which to continually enter into and play within the game world; but more importantly, entering players join a community of players, inhabiting the world as residents rather than guests (200-3). These elements allow players to form connections with each other in these synthetic worlds, and within them, “places that [can] be experienced and marked through narrative activity,” as is done through role-playing (Laurel et al.).

Indeed, these intentional worlds have “been created with a particular vision of community, identity, and social life” to offer a carefully scripted experience. As well, much like with theme parks, and the experiences that are offered within them, these worlds are intended for consumption by players, rather than for creative production (Taylor, *Intentional* 4). Indeed, many of the performative behaviors that players

demonstrate within these games have emerged from consumption, such as with players showing off rare gear or mounts that they've gained by playing through content or dueling in front of cities; but even these players make use of the community and the environment to establish distinct identities by parking their avatars in highly visible places within player population centers to draw attention to their achievements. Role-players take part in this consumption to an extent to obtain props and clothing, but their performances are more likely to be separated from the game's mechanics.

Within role-playing games in particular, the emphasis on world-building, particularly on constructing believable environments, to convey narratives can be traced back through the history of role-playing games. For example, hobbyist war games feature figurines on miniature battle terrain wherein each player controls all of the units in a faction. These elements, and the use of historical locations and battles as a premise, together helped to simulate the "reality of the battlefield" for the players, who thus acted as military officers (Mackay 13-4). Tabletop role-playing games carried over the miniature battle terrain and the figurines from war games. However, instead of a historical premise, *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first tabletop game (and indeed, most games set in a fantasy setting) drew elements from the fantasy world of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* series and other fantasy novels; other games similarly drew inspiration from other fictional settings within other genres. These changes emphasized the importance of having a detailed, consistent fictional setting, an attribute of many fantasy novels and series, to provide a strong narrative foundation for players to perform through their characters, and within which to create fictions. Dungeon masters in role-playing games can take and modify these fantasy settings, which Daniel Mackay calls

“imaginary-entertainment environments,” to construct an imaginary space for role-players’ performances. This is similar to Brooks McNamara’s concept of the entertainment environment, but the imaginary space is not situated in a physical place, as with theme parks and LARPs, but instead expressed through a “material interface,” such as an oral description of a setting (as with tabletop role-playing games) or a projected image on a computer screen (as with computer or video games), that creates a “reconceptualized imaginary world” (Mackay 13-32).

In tabletop games, as with most types of role-playing games, the dungeon master has full control of the fantasy he wishes to tell, but the process of world-building usually starts by first choosing an existing setting for the game, and then expanding and modifying that world and its history to fit the story he wishes to tell (Fine 73). The dungeon master then has the responsibility of guiding a group of players through a scenario that he sets out for players, but game's direction is dictated less by the dungeon master, who adopts the role of the facilitator maintaining the integrity of the fantasy, and more by the "players acting through their characters" (84). Parts of the constructed world in these games can be drawn out as a reference at the discretion of the dungeon master, but he will typically describe locations within the game as they become relevant to the narrative that the characters are telling. Since it would be difficult to describe an entire world in detail, the dungeon master typically focuses his efforts instead on locations that represent choices or consequences for the characters, or locations that can operate as a means through which a dungeon master can shape events to create an enjoyable experience for the players (88). As such, the dungeon master can not only modify his created world at any time, he is expected to adapt to and reflect upon the players in the



game.

Other role-playing formats have inherited this model, but in transitioning to the computer as the only form of interaction, the process of creating worlds and the relationship between the role-player and the world her character inhabits shifts due to the interface change. For example, in a MUD-style game, administrators (dubbed immortals, adopting the metaphor of the dungeon master as a god) build a concrete world through text and code for player characters within which to navigate, interact, and role-play, but do not necessarily run storylines for players. Freeform chat role-playing typically has a loosely-defined theme and setting, mimicking different areas of an imaginary world through the use of separate chat rooms on hyperlinked pages to stand in for each space, similar to a MUD's structure. These chat rooms can have moderators in place to enforce codes of conduct as opposed to leading storylines; typically, players are expected to create and run their own storylines with others, and to define the setting themselves if need be. This role-playing format most closely resembles the structure of MMO role-playing, though the approach to worlds and environments differs because of the existence of a fully-rendered (if inflexible) virtual environment for MMO players to reference and to reside in through avatars.

Due to the constrained, static nature of the game environment, MMO role-players maintain an ambiguous relationship to their surroundings; they are both willing to work with their surroundings and willing to disregard it when convenient. This mirrors the use and consumption of popular culture, as addressed by Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategy and tactics in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He defines strategic practices as those that conform to the intent of a dominant power, which are contained within a

location owned or controlled by that power, and are thus considered proper; tactical practices are those situated in spaces that are not owned by the practicing group “without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance,” which manipulate and recombine what the dominant power has created in ways that diverge from the original intent (de Certeau). Similarly, the game’s developers have designed systems within the world they have created to constrain accepted player behavior and the environment itself; the practices they allow within the game are strategic. Players within the world who choose to role-play, by using locations within the game to tell stories of their own making, thus can be said to behave tactically when subverting the developers’ intents for a particular location and for the role of the player, as well.

What an MMO such as *World of Warcraft* lacks in player creation and control for role-players, it gains in access to a “[constructed] intentional world”, where the game’s designers have expressed a detailed lore (and within that, a set of values); T. L. Taylor identifies three themes in “Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them” through which game designers have expressed themselves: “immersion,” “identity and social responsibility,” and “legitimacy” (4).

These intentional worlds have “been created with a particular vision of community, identity, and social life” to offer a carefully scripted experience, but the worlds, and the play experiences that are offered within them, are also intended for consumption by players, rather than for creative production (4). Indeed, many of the performative behaviors that players demonstrate within these games have emerged from consumption.

Though players in these MMOs do not have the mechanical capability to alter the

game world or to dictate the fates of other characters as with a dungeon master, they can reshape the virtual environment in a limited fashion through storytelling. However, much like with freeform chat role-play, the organizing player constructs a premise and then acts as a facilitator rather than as a storyteller within the role-playing scene because she cannot forcefully affect other player characters without that player's out-of-character consent. As a result, participating role-players assume the role of their characters as a player within a scene and as the dungeon master for their characters.

Players, in assuming the persona of their in-game characters, consciously perform these distinct roles, as Goffman notes about situations in everyday life. Contrary to everyday life, though, players engage in this role-switching as a form of recreational play; Turner and Huizinga (as applied to video games by Salen and Zimmerman) note that the act of play creates and takes place within protected spaces that players agree to set apart from everyday life. These bounded spaces, and the stories players tell within them through virtual avatars, are situated within fictional game environments, which themselves convey strong dominant narratives and guided experiences. Players are able to create divergent interpretations of these environments, as de Certeau suggests, and thus transform them through use: broadly, players may alter these locations by establishing a different premise to better fit (and bound) the role-play scene, but also suggest various social roles set within the scene, similar to the frames of experience that Goffman and Fine propose. Players also use the environment to perform as their characters in several ways, as Schechner and Mackay suggest with tabletop role-playing games. While MMOs may have similar fantasy worlds as in other role-playing games, MMO role-players use their limited affordances instead to perform and direct their own characters and stories as

player and game-master. Role-playing events can thus be said to appropriate game locations to create situations which can facilitate the collaborative process, allowing characters to mingle, and players to create and bring larger, more wide-scale narratives to these locations and shape them through their use.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Process

#### On Ethnography

In conceptualizing this research project, perhaps the most important choice early on was how to approach the research itself. If my focus was on the design of game spaces, it would have been possible to merely examine these online in-game environments themselves and analyze the setting, the props, and the embedded lore itself, and perhaps even examine similar spaces in other MMOs or virtual worlds. A close examination of the design behind a space reveals the assumed purpose behind a space, at least from the perspective of the game developers; and this is still useful in considering the intent, the design itself.

But the focus of this work is not on intent and design, but on the actual use of game environments and locations by players who have no further indication of the design except for the digital manifestation that they see within the game. And since I am interested in what players are doing within these spaces, it therefore is logical to observe both an individual player's actions and behaviors within these environments and the culture of practice that has been established by these communities of players. Naturally, this is not the only method through which to approach this research question, or games research as a whole. However, for the study of emergent cultural practices, ethnography is a well-established method for qualitative study, such as the study Ackerman and

Muramatsu conducted on social activities within a MUD or Pearce's study on communities in Uru and There.com.

Within the wider field of ethnography, there are several approaches to data collection, as detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. For this study, I have taken a mixed methods approach, combining some quantitative methods, such as an analysis of attendance numbers at events, with qualitative methods. To this end, I have supplemented participant observation with intensive interviewing to provide a more thorough, many-faceted look into the subject material (Lofland and Lofland 2006).

In the case of online games research, participant observation is required at least on some level to observe at all, since the relevant activities occur not in the world at large, but within a game world (Pearce 2009). Moreover, in needing to enter the game world to observe, the researcher consents to the same tacit contract that every other player does upon clicking on the 'Login' button in the center of the opening screen: that they agree to the terms and conditions that the game company, now acting as service provider, has mandated. By this, I refer not only to rules, which are also part of these terms, but also to the game's underlying mechanics which comprise the natural laws of this world — including entering the game world, of being 'embodied' within the world as an avatar, like the other players in this world. In entering the game with the same guise as other players, I was already participating on a basic level. While the existence of the avatar is a technical constraint, the avatar is also an element of immersion into the environment that has been the focus of my research; in particular, this allows me to watch in-game events from the viewpoint of an audience member, an active participant, or detached observer.

Furthermore, since my research focus was on a community of players centered on role-playing, the extent of my participation also extended to the creation of a character for the avatar and an adherence to typical role-playing behaviors.

That said, my choice in avatar and character, as well as the complications that came of it (particularly with my other identity on the server), will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

## Population and Focus

For a research project on player-organized events in MMORPGs, the range of games and populations I could have chosen from is both huge and daunting. And digital ethnography in particular has a long preparatory process, requiring familiarity with the platform and technology, the trust of a population and an understanding of its customs, and the resources to access it — this necessarily requires a huge time investment to attain or foster before even the start of a research project, disregarding the time required actually conduct the research process itself. The population and focus that I decided upon, while chosen for suitability toward my research problem, were also chosen practically to address these concerns, which are not trivial, given the constrained time frame in which to complete this thesis document. My interest in collaborative storytelling led me to focus my research specifically on role-playing as an expression of narrative agency through which players, as their characters, can inhabit, impress, and manipulate otherwise static in-game environments. From there, I chose to study a community with whose practices and customs I was already familiar, as well as its leadership network.

Perhaps the choice that has drawn the most attention from people outside of the community that I selected to focus upon was the game itself. Compared to other MMOs or virtual worlds, *World of Warcraft* offers very limited creative control to its player base. Certainly, players have no way to affect a persistent change upon their environments as they would within virtual worlds such as *There* or *Second Life*, which allows players to create and place buildings and structures into the world. However, this design decision is fairly standard across most MMOs, particularly those offering a choice of servers to their player base and therefore must provide an equal experience across several instances of the same world. And while games such as *Champions Online* may offer destructible objects in the environment, such as trash receptacles or lampposts, these objects will automatically respawn after a certain time if destroyed, as if they had never been touched. The lamppost comes back to give the next player who comes along the chance to destroy it (or not, as the case may be.) With regards to creative tools, *Lord of the Rings Online* offers instruments for players to compose and play music with; although the range of notes is limited and the sound obviously does not persist past the initial play period (except as an exportable score), the ability to play an instrument within the world for others to listen to still creates a sense of player agency within that world. All of these, despite their setbacks, allow players and character to leave at least some individual (if not necessarily unique) impression on the world.

Indeed, *World of Warcraft* has relatively little support for role-playing in comparison, but it does have a thriving role-playing community nonetheless. The game offers the option to play on an RP (Role-Playing) server, with distinctions for PvE



(Player versus Environment) and PvP (Player versus Player) rulesets. These servers are identical to other standard servers, except that RP servers are also governed by a modified policy established by Blizzard Entertainment to ensure a more immersive experience, including a stricter naming policy and guidelines for in-character and out-of-character chat. In practice, for these policies to be enforced, players must be proactive about reporting infractions to game moderators through the in-game moderation tool — and therefore must be knowledgeable about these extra policies and the necessary procedures through which to contact moderators. Thus, it is not uncommon for threats of reports, or actual reports, to be levied against players who disrupt (‘grief’) role-playing activity in-game, or to lesser extent, players who participate (solely or otherwise) in activities outside of the community’s norm, especially end-game raiding.

Beyond established role-playing servers, the game also has a variety of junk items that can be sold to vendors for a pittance; these range from commonplace animal parts such as a Fractured Canine to quirkier items, such as a religious pamphlet (‘Priestly Preening: Be Like Your Betters’), a Lucky Rock, and a Rag Doll. Some, such as the Battered Jungle Hat, can even be equipped for role-playing outfits, used for cosmetic effect (such as fireworks), or consumed (including a wide variety of alcoholic drinks.) These items exist in part to add flavor into the world, but also double as useful role-playing props that can be kept or exchanged as needed in a given scene.

Other built-in social tools have also been adapted for use by role-playing communities in and out of the game. Custom global chat channels allow for in-character and out-of-character communication within groups of players and even within a server’s

community; the only functional limitations are by faction and server, as with all communication. The most useful tool, however, has been the in-game mail system, which both allows players to send and receive letters (with attachments) and also to make a copy of sent letters; this effectively allows players to create their own documents within the game, or to save important letters. One subject has even carried out mail orders at market events for customers, using a link to his profession window to take crafting requests and a portable mailbox to send packages with a COD amount for payment. However, the in-game mail system has a 500-character limit, which often either limits communication to terse messages or occasionally letters that span several pages. For communication beyond individuals or small groups, there exists both an official forum for each server and a general role-playing forum for the community at large.

Despite these limited offerings, *World of Warcraft* still maintains a community that has been willing to work within the game's constraints, and has taken initiative to address some of these limitations. For example, players have created role-playing add-ons<sup>3</sup> for the game to provide additional functionality to augment the player experience, such as FlagRSP, which provides the option to set custom player titles and descriptions that can be viewed by other players using the add-on, or Storyteller, a macro creator that splices up longer text blocks into smaller chat-friendly chunks and binds them to buttons — which is particularly useful when trying to recite a poem, tell a longer, pre-written story, or act out a part of a play. Some of these add-ons, like FlagRSP, have become important markers within the community, denoting a player's interest in role-playing (or identity as

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<sup>3</sup> Add-ons in *World of Warcraft* are software plug-ins that modify existing functionality and/or alter the appearance of the default user interface; this practice is encouraged by the developers.

a role-player); others, such as Storyteller, cater to specific styles of play. Regardless of their relative popularity, these tools have helped to facilitate storytelling to positive effect.

Players have also extended their efforts outside of the game as well; many of the role-playing servers either have or had external resources established for the server's role-playing community. These include informative resources posted and maintained by players on the official forums (which can then be 'stickied' at the top of the forum by official moderators upon request), wiki sites for world lore, player profiles, histories, and stories, and external server forums and websites for role-players to socialize in a supportive, more protected environment (or, at least, away from forum trolls and griefers.) These external communities are then often brought back into the game as custom chat channels for role-players to congregate in while playing or idling; these channels are also useful outlets through which to broadcast announcements about role-playing events and activities. Indeed, the extent to which these players have gone to create and support their activities and server communities — while certainly not exclusive to role-playing or to the game — is what made the role-playing community in *World of Warcraft* both remarkable and particularly worth studying, even ignoring both my technical familiarity with the game and with the larger role-playing community there.

Compared to the decision between games, the decision between servers was necessarily more personal: it was derived primarily from my existing knowledge of the game and the community's well-remarked and oft-discussed tendencies over the past four years. When the embryo of what would eventually become this study was first proposed,

the state of role-playing servers in *World of Warcraft* was in flux. The last wave of new role-playing servers had long crested and settled, and the rush of new content sent even the most active role-playing servers into distraction (or dismay) over the newly-available content. My original plan was to center my research endeavors on an established role-playing server where, given that I was playing there at the time, I had existing connections there to more easily begin my research. Moreover, this particular server, Ashtongue Deathsworn<sup>4</sup>, still had an active role-playing community at the time, particularly compared to other, quieter servers. This is particularly noteworthy for two reasons: first, players have often complained that past the first year of a given server's life, role-playing activity starts to atrophy; and second, this particular server had long been around by the time I started this study. While nothing is ever guaranteed about communities, particularly online communities (as will be covered below), the server's existing longevity offered better chances to have this particular community persist for at least the duration of my study.

This plan, as many do during ethnographic research, changed when Blizzard Entertainment announced free character transfers to a new role-playing server, Violet Eye, from several of the role-playing servers released at the time. While Ashtongue Deathsworn, the server I was considering initially, was not one of the servers being offered these transfers, a number of discontent players there were also planning to pay to transfer to Violet Eye as soon as possible, seeking a fresh start and the potential to help establish a new role-playing 'haven'. Indeed, this was a rare opportunity to observe the

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<sup>4</sup> Ashtongue Deathsworn, as with all other server and guild names, are pseudonyms to preserve subject privacy. Players have only been identified by their group affiliation.

early community life of a new server, particularly one populated with players who were bringing experience from a wide range of servers. Furthermore, as I narrowed my research question to one befitting the scope of a thesis, it became increasingly important to choose a community that would be focused on outreach — particularly through player-organized events. For this, a new server trying to establish its role-playing community was all but perfect for my research.

While working through the initial two-month IRB application process, which is covered in the next chapter, I attended (and later participated in) several events on Violet Eye; my goal was to identify what guilds and individuals were organizing events, and what kinds of events were being organized. Of these, I eventually approached one specific guild to be the focus group for this study. In the several months that this guild, the Plainstrider Performers, had been running prior to my discussion with them, they were running two recurring events, and had run a few larger special events. Certainly, there were other guilds and individuals who were also organizing events at the time, but most of these were either one-off events (which had to be covered differently), or did not have public events as their primary focus, as this guild did. Additionally, there were also more practical factors. Most notably, I had interacted with several members from this guild previously as an event participant, organizer, and role-player, which established my credibility as a member of the community. This helped immensely when I approached them later as a researcher.

## The IRB Process

Before performing human subjects research of any kind at the university, all

researchers are required to go through training to be certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and then to submit a research protocol with the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. These procedures ensure that these studies are reviewed by a third party and found to be ethnically sound, and that the researchers themselves understand the policies and procedures concerning human subjects research.

Ethnography — and particularly digital ethnography, where all contact and interaction between researcher and subject occurs online — is not as potentially invasive, harmful, or risky to the subject when compared to medical or psychological studies, but particularly when interacting with fluid online communities as a participant observer, it becomes even more important to follow existing research protocols, such as obtaining informed consent from participants. This study was certainly no exception to this. This process, which I initiated after coming up with an initial concept for a research question, started with going through the self-guided training and mini-quizzes on the CITI website, with questions that pertained to a wide range of human subjects research, including medical and psychological studies, as well as sociological studies, such as this study. Moreover, since this study took place primarily within an MMO and thus had little to no precedent at my university, much of this IRB process involved adjusting these existing practices to function within a digital environment (where applicable) and carefully explained and scrutinized to the board.

The IRB application process, as a result, ended up taking most of the time spent on this study, and took place in three distinct stages. The first stage, which took

approximately two months from the initiation of the application process to the final approval, consisted of drafting the initial protocol and the necessary documents. This project originally started as an independent study examining the formation of role-playing character identities within *World of Warcraft*; as such, the original statement of purpose was written with this goal in mind.

Similarly, the population I described in the first draft of the proposal was seeking out individual players, as well as players within a role-playing guild (which would be selected after some initial observation), to recruit for this study; these players I would observe in public settings or in guild events before conducting individual and group interviews towards the end. The questions for these interviews, a provisional list of which was submitted with this draft, included the standard introductory questions, such as “What is the name of your main (character)?” — which was the extent to which any participant was ever identified — and broad, open-ended questions to allow players room to insert examples or even stories that they felt were relevant, such as “Did you modify your character’s backstory after you started playing them? If so, how and why?” The questions covered the breadth of the study, but not the depth; the intent was to have further questions emerge from the answers that players would provide.

Perhaps the most complex issue to resolve, however, was figuring out how to handle informed consent. Typically, ethnographic studies would be conducted partially or entirely in-person, which meant that paper forms could easily be distributed. With a digital study such as this one, however, it would have been logistically impractical to distribute a paper form to all participants, who are themselves spread out around the

world, and receive an actual signature. Such a measure would have been unnecessarily intrusive. By requesting sensitive information, such as a real name and a mailing address, I would be violating the anonymity of the players involved — players who would be otherwise only identified by their avatar names. All of these factors were likely to discourage even the most enthusiastic players from participating. Instead, I opted to create an online form hosted on a secure server, adapted from an IRB-approved digital consent form adopted from standard practices in the Emergent Game Group under Dr. Celia Pearce. This would allow me to simply pass a link along that they would be able to fill out and submit from their own computers at their leisure.

As such, the form was formal but brief; however, to protect the privacy of the players involved, I chose to ask only for their avatar names and birth years. This was to both to allow players to sign the form with avatar names and to identify which players had formally consented to participate in the study, and to verify that participating players were of legal age, since obtaining consent from a minor typically involves the consent of the minor's parent or legal guardian — this again would have intruded into the minor's private life. Naturally, given that this was an online environment, I would not be able to verify this, and would have to trust that players were telling the truth. Moreover, within an MMO's player base, minors typically make up approximately 25% of the player base (Yee 16).

The IRB's answer to the exclusion of minors was wholly unexpected. Deeming the study as 'low-risk', they stated that since the study had no just cause inherent in its purpose to exclude minors, I could not discriminate my population based on age.



Furthermore, since minors could not legally sign to indicate informed consent but still needed to formally indicate that they understood the study and agreed to participate, they would need to sign an assent form instead. This assent form, also created online on the same secure server, enabled minors to sign for themselves without needing parental permission — since, again, the IRB had judged the study to be low-risk. After resolving this issue, and clarifying the definition of an MMO to the IRB, this draft of the protocol was approved.

About eight months after receiving approval on the initial protocol, I had to submit an IRB revision when my research moved to this thesis. Some sections only needed trivial changes, such as the consent and assent forms, but the purpose needed to be revised to address the shift in focus from individual stories to public, player-organized events. This process only took three weeks, particularly since the study remained low-risk and the methodology largely remained the same, except for the recruitment process, since the focus population changed from general role-players to event organizers.

## Research

### Character and Avatar

Within a role-playing environment, where a player is simultaneously fulfilling both the role of a character and of a player (which is itself often separate from the person at the keyboard), the lines between play and performance are often blurred together. As a narrative activity, the type of improvisational performance that occurs within the in-

character space becomes play, while the mechanics of play become rich settings, situations, or props to drive or enhance storytelling within a virtual environment.

As a result, to enter into the community as a participant observer, I had to adopt a similar set of roles to properly enter the world, while also maintaining the persona of an ethnographer. The first step to enter the game, however, was to create the avatar I would be represented by; but in the process of creating a ‘research avatar’, I also ended up having two other avatars that players would identify me by. Indeed, shortly after Blizzard Entertainment released my primary research server, Violet Eye, I took advantage of the initial free transfers to move a little-played Alliance avatar (colloquially known as an alt) to this server and started playing casually to acquaint myself with the Alliance half of the role-playing community (as players cannot communicate in-game across factional lines.) Once character creation was enabled on this realm, I created a Horde avatar to better observe the other half of the community. This Horde avatar would later become my primary identity on this server in the months before formally initiating my research. I observed and interacted with the community both in-game within the game and outside on the forums through this avatar, and so it became the identity by which I was most commonly known. Through this, I was able to establish my credibility as a role-player and a sense of trust within the community, and to better discern the atmosphere within the role-playing community on Violet Eye, particularly as a comparison to my own prior experiences on another role-playing server. These helped me immensely later when it came time to approach the community as a researcher.

However, since I was essentially part of the community by the time my research

formally started, I found it necessary to create a separate avatar devoted to research. My reasons for choosing to do this were two-fold. First, while I was already acquainted with the Plainstrider Performers, the guild I would be observing, I wanted to join the guild to better familiarize myself with the guild's operations and methods for organizing and running events, as well as to better understand the guild as a whole. Second, I needed an avatar that represented my role as a researcher as opposed to merely a player, but the members of the Plainstrider Performers often referred to me by my primary character anyway when I was on this alt, as I had made no secret of my other identity. Third, the separate avatar provided some much-needed isolation and focus, especially when I was attending events and conducting interviews; in fact, the visual distinction on screen made it significantly easier to assume the role of ethnographer.

As such, I created this research avatar deliberately with this guild and my role in mind. Given that this was a Horde guild, my avatar also had to be Horde; of the available options, I chose to create a tauren, which is one of the more 'neutral' races within the



**Figure 1: The ghost wolf form I adopted during the study.**

game's lore, and comparatively bears less of an out-of-character stigma within the community due to its benign background within the game's lore. Out of the available classes, I chose to create a shaman. While the shaman's position within the lore as the sage appealed to me as a representation of my status as a researcher, my actual reason was far more practical: the perk of being a shaman included the ability to turn into a Ghost Wolf, which appeared as a translucent wolf. As such, I could move around an environment without overtly standing out — which was useful especially when taking screenshots — and without the stigma of secrecy or the movement penalties that similar abilities, such as Stealth, had attached to them.

In addition to creating an avatar, I also needed to create a living, breathing character to be able to traverse and inhabit the in-character space, where these events were typically taking place, though the formation of the shaman's character actually emerged from a suggestion from the guild master, after inviting my research avatar to the Plainstrider Performers, to go fill out a formal application to the guild for the 'full' Plainstrider experience. This application form, like in many role-playing guilds, had both an in-character section and an out-of-character section. The in-character section probed for information about the character's motivations to join this troupe, as well as a few quirky questions to gauge their personality. These I used to map out a light-hearted, easy-going character that could slip in and out of situations as needed; in a sense, it was almost like a game within itself. Beyond that, I also had to come up with the character's surname and provide a written description. These went into an add-on that would modify the in-game tooltip to display information relevant to role-playing. This is commonly

used within the role-playing community to provide additional information about a character, and also often used to identify other role-players in world.

## In the Field

The field study took place within *World of Warcraft*, which was the primary research method, and spanned twelve months. Of these twelve months, the first eight months were a lengthy lead-up to the eventual formal study, focused on observing and interacting with the Violet Eye community at large and the last four months were comprised of the main study, focusing on the Plainstrider Performers and the role-playing events that occurred during this period.

During this lead-up period, though initially intended as preparatory work for the independent study that would later evolve into this thesis, my in-game fieldwork consisted of observing the development of Violet Eye, which started shortly after the server opened, and of its role-playing community. This consisted of establishing and building connections with other players and guilds, both out-of-character as a player and in-character as a role-player, as well as attending introductory events and watching public chat channels. These public channels operated as ongoing community meet-and-greets for the initial few months, and was also where many guilds both recruited within the game (when recruiting at all) and advertised events. However, the first several months of a server's life are typically unstable as a community grows into its own, and Violet Eye was certainly no different. Populated as it was by so many players from older role-playing realms, the server had a number of ambitious events planned — some of which came to pass, some of which did not, and some of which persisted. At this point, I had

made some initial contacts with groups and individuals who were actively engaged in organizing public events, and made an active effort to be involved both with spontaneous play and planned event play. In part, this was to recreate a measure of the trust and rapport that I had on my old server, which would better establish the trust needed to conduct this study properly.

As for the main study, I initiated the process by approaching the Plainstrider Performers' then-current guild leader, with whom I had interacted with previously, and explained my interest in studying the guild and its public events. She expressed her interest in the project, offered her support, and allowed me entry into the guild on my newly-created research alt. This in itself was a mark of faith for which I have been incredibly grateful, since bearing the guild tag also meant being entrusted to maintain the guild's reputation and to represent them wherever I went in the game world. In the guild's channel, I introduced myself by my primary character's name — in the interests of full disclosure — and explained the study and what I would be doing, and fielded questions. Later, following a formal application to the Performers, I sent out a private message on the guild's forums to the officers, requesting permission to post recruitment information on their forums, and when they had given their approval, I posted the IRB-approved research request with a link to the consent form. This would be my primary means of informing and obtaining consent within the guild, although I continued to field questions throughout the four months as well.

The recruitment process for out-of-guild events was more complicated; as it was both impossible to obtain consent from the company to post recruitment information on

the official forums (as well as unlikely that they would consent as well) and impractical for this study given its focus on event organizers, who themselves make up a relatively small percentage of the entire player base. Furthermore, it was impossible to predict when events would occur until the organizers themselves started to advertise them. Instead, I monitored the community's several forums, including the general forum, for event postings and then contacted the named organizers through the in-game mail system. This, in particular, allowed organizers to reply at their own leisure, instead of disrupting their playtime. I would use this model later to schedule formal interviews as well.

The one issue with this method, as I discovered quickly, was that it was difficult to include the full link to the consent form within the 200-character limit of the in-game mail system — which would then have to be typed manually into a browser. With the prevalence of 'keyloggers' and embedded malware targeted at *World of Warcraft* players, typically to allow hackers to steal players' account information, I was wary of shortening the URL; doing so would disguise the true address, which in turn would mean that players could be unwilling to participate due to their refusal to go to a disguised webpage. In the end, I used my primary avatar name as part of a custom shortened URL, and leveraged my existing reputation within the community to establish trust, which seemed to work well.

The field visits themselves were often varied at best, and wholly reliant on the events that players chose to organize and when they were occurring. I would log onto the research character every few days in between events to listen in to the general chatter and to mingle with the guild, as well as to catch snippets of the process involved in

organizing events. However, the majority of the field visits were on the events themselves. Within the Plainstrider Performers, I would track upcoming events through the in-game calendar, and arrange to be online before the events — ranging from an hour and a half beforehand, which is typically when last-minute preparations and pre-event set-up takes place, to fifteen minutes before, which is typically when the audience begins to gather.

One of the main guidelines I set for myself when beginning this study was, as is typical in most ethnographic studies, to follow the customs of the community while present and to adjust my behavior as needed. This meant not merely attending as someone outside of these events, but to attend within the same narrative framework that the other players were bringing their characters in — that is, to attend in-character. During these events, therefore, I would attend on my research avatar as that character when possible. This included rituals such as assembling a couple sets of gear for various in-character situations, such as the uniform for the Plainstrider Performers during their events, and playing out an entry into a scene, even if it was only walking up to the event location and emoting a nod in greeting.

During a typical event, I used Elephant, an add-on, to record the text chat, since it could record the last 1000 lines from each channel, which was usually enough to cover the average event, and then open a field from which I would be able to copy the log and paste it into a text editor. That said, I also took advantage of the in-game tabbed chat, creating two chat windows, which I kept open on opposite sides of the screen, and filtering content by chat channel — for this, it was enough to sort by in-character and out-



of-character channels to better follow the in-character activity and backstage arrangements. As well, I was able to take screenshots throughout the event by temporarily turning player names off and using the in-game function to do so, which I had associated to a key combination (also known as ‘keybinding’) prior to the first event. These screenshots were then automatically saved into a folder with dates and times in the file names. This allowed me to focus on note-taking during an event, where I would pay attention to interesting occurrences, the arrangement of characters, and how the acts were staged, as well as some quick observations on the location itself.

Beyond this, I had initially resolved to sit near the back as a Ghost Wolf and play silent watchdog while observing the Plainstrider Performers’ events, but in adapting to the Performers’ customs, I had to revise this resolution. Even in the passive capacity that I had originally be operating under, my character was still in-character, and still bore the guild tag of the hosting guild — which included an expectation to facilitate role-playing at these events. In some instances, I would provide directions and engage in banter. In other instances, such as the shows, I would volunteer for small tasks, providing filler entertainment between acts as a dancing wolf or as a drinks waiter. The latter role actually worked out well for data collection purposes, since my character now had an excuse to be mobile during the event so I could better take screenshots of the location and scene. Perhaps exemplifying the usefulness of participant observation, I gained some much-needed insight into the roles that the Performers took on during these events from this foray into event facilitation. As well, the Performers also adopted me in as one of the group towards the end of the study, even going so far as to role-play out my character’s

promotion, which was an especially touching gesture.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, both participant observation, covered above, and intensive interviewing were used to collect data during this study. The interview process occurred during the last month of the study, and were requested and scheduled ahead of time through in-game mail, as to not intrude upon the player's game time, and offered to conduct the interview either in-game or through another means of communication, depending on the person's comfort. The majority of the interviews were then conducted live in-world, spanning between an hour and a half and three hours, and either took place through party chat or in whispers. It seemed that most preferred this method of communication as it would be less disruptive to their other activities. There were a few exceptions, however. One interview was conducted strictly through mail because of conflicting schedules; because of the character limit, I was forced to send out three separate mails with the questions enclosed, but the player responded with a link to a document with the responses. Another interview took place spontaneously outside of the game over instant messaging, which was easier to gauge the pacing of because the service had an indicator of when the person was typing, and the last was supposed to take place through e-mail, but response times were considerably slower through that medium and I was not able to receive a response before the study ended.

Most of the interviews were with the leadership team of the Plainstrider Performers, but a few others were with other players on Violet Eye who had organized other role-playing events on the server. Additionally, while I did not formally conduct a study on Ashtongue Deathsworn, the original server I had intended to observe, I did end up

interviewing some players from this realm toward the end of the data collection period. These players had (and continue to) run a bi-weekly tavern for the four years that the server has been in existence; their input provided additional perspectives on events on different servers and from players who had experience with being involved in a long-running, recurring event.

## Analysis

Out of this fieldwork was an extensive amount of data, much of which was comprised of scattered chat logs across multiple channels; too much, indeed, to reasonably tackle as a whole. The first step was simply to organize the collected data into a structure that could be easily sorted and searched through. To do this, I was careful to save my data following a specific naming format after each field visit, and to keep the visit's chat logs from each channel in separate text files. The naming procedure I established included the date of each event, as well as the name (or an abbreviated version of it) of the event and the specific data contained therein. Each individual event had a separate directory as well, into which went the field notes and raw data — including screenshots — relevant to the event. This allowed me to later locate specific files more easily.

I then created a database for the textual data in FileMaker Pro, a practice adopted from standard practices in the Emergent Game Group under Dr. Celia Pearce. Each database entry represented a single event and included basic information on in-game location, date, time, affiliated group, and the main organizer. Into each entry I compiled the relevant field notes and chat logs, which were sorted by whether the channel was in-

character or out-of-character. With the list view, I could view all of the basic information for each event in a table, and even wrote some basic scripts to sort the data by each category, and compare chat logs roughly side-by-side; it was unfortunately impossible to create a separate field for each channel and still be able to read the content within the fields legibly. Most importantly, though, was that the database allowed me to conduct text search within each of these fields, thereby allowing me to easily break the raw data down into smaller categories and start coding this data.

As I was conducting interviews and wrapping up my fieldwork, I started taking notes on the side about patterns I was noting from what I had observed and the answers that players provided. This provided the basic framework for the more in-depth trend analysis that I would later begin to conduct, which I would then continue to refine iteratively as I conducted more interviews and continued to review the collected data — which often occurred while transferring information from external files into the database. More obvious emergent behavior patterns I made note of throughout the study in various text documents, which were then sifted through and collected in a list of preliminary observations. Certain events also took place repeatedly in the same locations, which allowed me to make note of similarities and differences between the events and pinpoint nuances about a particular location; as well, when asking about players' opinions of certain event venues, they were able to comment on similar trends taking place over a much longer period of time from their own observations. While I had no control over the data points that players were picking, I was still able to revisit a number of these data points and better confirm certain persistent behavioral patterns.

Perhaps the most useful (and surprising) method of discovering some of my findings, though, was through the writing process itself, which helped to “crystallize...[and] even produce new insights” about the data I had collected by forcing my mind to put words to yet-unarticulated concepts (Lofland and Lofland 229).

## Unpredictability of Play

As with many ethnographic studies, the presence of individuals in the study and even as the focus of the study was itself a significant variable. Online communities, in particular, are notorious for being fluid and transient, and within a game world, where the player is typically hidden behind a fake name and a generic avatar, anonymity and the pursuit of entertainment creates a lack of accountability that can allow players to vanish from (or return secretly to) a community without typically much forewarning. Yet other issues occur when the social bonds within a community become strained or even severed. During the eight months prior to the start of this study, I watched as several ambitious player projects and guilds drifted in and out of existence, and as players themselves routinely left the game to focus on other games or pursuits. As a result, I was aware that I had to pick my focus group very carefully; choosing a guild that would disband shortly after would have set my research much behind schedule at the least.

Of the guilds I had been quietly observing, the Plainstrider Performers were perhaps the most active and stable of these guilds. Still, even the most stable of guilds will often have a fluctuating membership as individual players’ interests drifted from the guild’s activities or from the game, and this guild was certainly no different. The leadership shifted during the study, as officers took breaks or stepped down due to other

issues, but these changes fortunately did not seem to heavily disrupt the guild.

Another variable beyond my control was the frequency of events. What data I collected, and the particular data points available to me, was wholly dependent on the activities of players organizing these events. Given the size of the community, it was impossible for me to find out about events being executed by every group before advertisements went out, so I often relied on various forums and word-of-mouth to find out about events. And since these events occur as a form of entertainment within the game, they are run on a strictly voluntary basis. As a result, an event could be delayed or canceled depending on the number of participants around to help run the particular event, or a number of extraneous factors — and this happened several times during the study. In recurring events, the organizing team would often change from event to event depending on the availability of the players involved.

Once an event went underway, there was little guarantee that it would necessarily go as planned. These events took place in frequented areas, and were typically open invitation. Sometimes, passers-by would stumble upon an event and choose to stay, while other times, players would come specifically to ‘grief’, or disrupt, the event. These were all valid examples of emergent gameplay, though, and even ended up providing useful data for this study; but again, the data I collected was highly colored by the occurrences that happened to take place during this study.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## Overview

In previous chapters, I have talked at length on the importance of locations and environments in defining the roles that people assume, both in everyday life and within fictional worlds. In this section, I present the findings that emerged out of the data gathered from the ethnographic study described previously. These findings are comprised of a synthesis of my field observations from the events that I attended in-game and the interviews I conducted with event organizers, who have themselves referenced past and present events from their own experiences, including events from other role-playing servers in *World of Warcraft*. To this end, I will start with general findings, applicable to most areas, and then cover some of the in-game field locations in more detail, particularly those used for different kinds of events.

To reiterate, the guild I focused on was the Plainstrider Performers, which was on Violet Eye, the primary server where the study was conducted. The Performers were most known for their bimonthly traveling shows, wherein the members and volunteers from the community performed acts in a different location every month for a player audience; they also hosted a sporadic market event to allow players to buy, sell, and trade in-game real and fake goods (or at least falsely advertised goods) to each other in-character. I also covered Violet Eye's anniversary parade, which was a single event that consisted of a procession of role-players through part of the world and a party at the end to celebrate the server's birthday, and a series of in-character druid meetings, which

started as an independent side project by a few of the Performers, but that stopped prior to the start of the study and was later restarted with a different structure and with different leadership. The other guild covered in the study was The Nautilus on Ashtongue Deathsworn, the server I had initially considered; the guild hosted a biweekly tavern night for characters to socialize and meet other characters. All names, including guild and server names, have been changed to protect the privacy of the participating players.

Role-players use and work within their game environments in significant ways. While this statement might seem obvious, given that it forms the basis of the study, it was unclear at the beginning of the study whether the environment affected the premise behind or the action within a role-playing scene in any considerable measure. Given that much of a scene's actual content typically occurred within the chat pane, save for rudimentary positioning, props, and clothing, which were conveyed within the game, it was unclear how much players took their environment into consideration while role-playing, or how much of an impact it had on the role-play in practice. But players did, in fact, take their environments into account, often commenting on the particular surroundings, and took advantage of its convenient presence to skip over the convention of describing the location to 'set' the scene and move right into the action, and to work it into their stories, such as providing a premise for a meeting, or going to the tavern for a drink, or augmenting a running narrative with insights into the history (or lore) behind the area, such as reminiscing about the past glory of a city while sitting in some ruins. For role-players, the environment in which the character appears or doesn't appear within conveys information about the character's allegiance and identity.



The environment is used here to refer broadly to the game world as pieces of a set within a theatre. A location within that environment refers to a smaller area within that environment, and can both be considered a narrative block and a backdrop for an event; for this thesis, the scope of a location is equivalent to what *World of Warcraft* considers a sub-zone (for example, Cathedral Square in Stormwind City is considered a sub-zone, while the Cathedral itself is considered a separate sub-zone.) A venue is the staging space for the event itself, and can expand or contract as an event progresses. Generally, a venue is contained within a single location, though sometimes it can encompass a small location or even several locations, in the case of mobile events. In choosing a particular venue for an event, players mentioned additional criteria that factored into their decisions. These findings, in particular, arose in part from my field observations, and in part emerged from the interviews with event organizers across guilds, factions, and servers, and arose from their own experiences. These considerations include accessibility, lore relevance, landmarks, spatial composition and use, and familiarity.

## From the Players: Creating Fictional Spaces

The narrative importance of a location to a role-playing community depended on its importance within the lore of the universe, as dictated by the developers, and more importantly, its frequency of use as a venue. As mentioned previously, the Performers valued the ruins for its importance to the canon, its convenience as a travel hub, and its centralized, easily compartmentalized layout. Indeed, other groups on other servers have hosted events in the same location, from large-scale events like Halloween balls to small

guild meetings, because of the same affordances, rendering this location a fairly popular venue across several role-play communities. Its importance as a venue on role-playing communities remains consistent, though its relative significance still differs from server to server.

The Nautilus' tavern in Ratchet, for example, is an institution on the server Ashtongue Deathsworn, while the same location sees limited to no use on other role-playing servers. The tavern's cultural significance is derived from its frequency of use, coming to life every Tuesday and Thursday as role-players bring their characters and stories to the tavern, and its long history, derived from four years of player activity in the same place. Indeed, the frequency and consistency of its use have also reflected upon the Nautilus as the venue's caretakers to the point where outside players have asked and (successfully) held their events in conjunction with the guild's tavern nights. While the location has been linked to this player-run tavern, the organizers have experimented with moving the tavern successfully for special events, such as hosting the tavern for a night on a moving (but non-teleporting) airship.

In contrast, the Plainstrider Performers set up their shows in different locations, as befitting their in-character premise of a traveling show. One of the Performers' leaders explained that the criteria for viable locations were largely practical in nature and emerged from the guild's experiences. As she explained:

When we first started the show, they used to be cross faction, and we would have one at the Elwynn Forest Darkmoon Faire. We always said we were running it in conjunction with them. So, there were problems all four times we did it...consistent, really. I finally gave up... First there was NPC (non-player character) spam, Darkmoon does NOT shut up. Then there were grievers, for

some reason the Alliance would always grief our shows whether we had Alliance toons doing shows or not. Finally, because of the proximity to Goldshire, guards would constantly flag Hordies...or the grievers would drag them. Not to mention lack of flight point. Also we had about 2 warlocks in the faire...they are just hard to come by. We learned a lot from Elwynn Forest.

Both the Performers' unconventional decision to move locations and criteria for choosing locations came out of "trial and error" over several months. For the former, the shifting locations had originally been a constraint of the Darkmoon Faire, a developer-created static carnival event that dynamically spawned on the first week of every month and swapped locations each month between the Horde-favored Mulgore and the Alliance-favored Elwynn Forest. After Elwynn Forest proved to be an unsuitable venue for the player-run event, the organizers worked the negative experience into the guild's narrative as a conflict of interest between the NPC running the Darkmoon Faire and the Performers' shows, but continued the tradition of moving to a different venue for their monthly shows. Players have since grown accustomed to the show's unpredictable and often unconventional venues, enjoying the change of pace and the opportunity to travel in-character.

Other groups also echoed the Performers' criteria for both moving and stationary events, which are listed below:

- *Accessibility*: The less time players had to spend to get to the venue, the more likely they would be inclined to attend the event at all. As such, organizers all considered proximity to in-game transportation, such as flight points, or major cities when choosing a location for a venue. Many of the more aesthetically-pleasing areas were also in more difficult to reach locations, hindering the ability for newer or lower-leveled players to

attend, though if a location deemed was spectacular enough to use as a venue, organizers typically offered to summon attendees to the venue to offset the travel difficulties.

- *Non-Player Characters*: Excessive chat spam from NPCs, especially those scripted to repeat barks on timed intervals, was usually deemed too disruptive for role-playing events. Even merely the presence of NPCs in a location, regardless of their friendliness to players, could render a location unusable, especially if they were occupying a usable set piece, such as a platform that could be used as a stage, or positioned as to be difficult to ignore, such as the center of the room.

- *Level Design*: Unsurprisingly, layout and aesthetics were important factors in determining a location for a venue. Most locations were considered first based on their suitability for an event's premise. Indeed, members from both the Plainstrider Performers and The Nautilus noted that the initial locations for their events had been chosen for thematic reasons, and then re-evaluated after logistical problems emerged from events held at those locations.

## Accessibility

Perhaps the most obvious criterion when players are considering potential venues is accessibility; every organizer I interviewed mentioned their goal was to make their particular event or events "as accessible as possible." This is important not only in the success of an event (such as drawing players to an event by its convenience to their other in-game activities and sustaining player interest in periodic events, such as taverns) but

also to the perceived responsibility of these RP (role-play) events to be as "neutral" as is possible within an often-polarized server community. Thus, the task of the event organizer is provide an inclusive premise to appeal to a wide range of characters and a place for players to "gather and interact through role-playing," "to get RPer networking with other RPer...and just RP," and "to facilitate RP...[and] chat with everyone, involve whomever is there", as several organizers mentioned in interviews.

Broadly, the accessibility of a location refers to the ease to which avatars can travel to that location, but within a game, avatar and mob (creature) levels, as well as other game mechanics, also factor into how usable an otherwise attractive environment might be. As one organizer from the Plainstrider Performers noted, "We think about the levels of the people attending, the ease of actually getting there and the level of the mobs in the area...how easy it is to get to, and what kinds of mobs people will have to deal with upon arriving there." Another organizer from the Performers mentioned that although the selection process was often a "random decision," they still looked for "creature comforts" such as "a flightpath or a warlock available," "[lack of] NPC spam," and even minimizing the chance that they will "get murdered by guards or grieved by Alliance."

Players typically considered ease of accessibility in relation to major cities and the methods of transportation that the developers have built into the world, such as flight paths, which can transport avatars from zone to zone, ships, and permanent portals. These transportation options work well for reaching faraway locations, but typically require initial travel to the zone to unlock the option or are restricted by character level for mechanical purposes. As such, these methods of transportation works well for events that will typically involve high-level characters, such as in-character raids or PVP (player

versus player) events, but at the exclusion of those who cannot otherwise reach the venue. Therefore, many open events tend to be hosted near major cities and starting zones to allow low-level characters (lowbies) to reach the area on foot on their own.

Event organizers also mentioned the use of "ports and summons" -- being portals that player can conjure that can transport avatars to a major city, and summoning stones that players can create to summon another avatar to the stone's location -- to address the transportation problems and open up more distant or exotic locations as venues. One player even noted while discussing future locations for the Performers' shows: "Part of the reason I created my warlock was so I could have summons readily available for more remote locations." Warlocks were most used to create summoning stones for events that either had no consistent venue or for special events, such as holiday-themed parties, which are often held in more thematically scenic but more difficult to access locations to add variety to the role-playing experience.

At the same time, a location too visibly close to a primary hub can potentially derail an event and break the in-character frame by attracting grievers, or players intentionally behaving in a disruptive, antagonistic manner. Players within the game cannot directly prevent other players from interfering with an event, short of reporting the griefer for moderation (which often takes days to be resolved) and/or using the ignore feature in-game (which only blocks out the text output from the offending player, not the visibility of that player's avatar, which could still disrupt through antics such as naked dancing.)

As one organizer noted about trying to enforce decorum during an event, "You can't actually make anyone do anything," which has made griefing a continual, if

sporadic, nuisance to organizers and their events. Several other organizers also mentioned griefing as an issue that played into how they evaluated the suitability of potential locations as venues, though how different organizers weighed this in practice seemed to depend on the nature of the event itself. Organizers of specialized or more exclusive events tended to hold their events in more obscure locations to reduce the risk of being stumbled upon. For example, a group of players organized several druid meetings on Violet Eye that were open only to druid characters. These meetings were held in Moonglade in part for its “mild exclusion” toward non-druid characters, and then moved to another location within the zone later “to prevent the possibility of any other class finding, joining, or griefing ICly or OOCly.” At the same time, given Moonglade’s neutrality to the primary factions and safety to low-level characters, the zone was fairly accessible to the event’s intended participants. In this way, players could attempt to manage the attendance, and therefore restrict the frame of the event.

Organizers of open events, however, typically valued accessibility over minimizing the chance for disruptions, choosing to keep their venues easy to find and working around disruptions as they occurred, though they still tried to set their events away from quest hubs and set away from roads to minimize disruptions. To help mitigate this, all of the open events had player 'guards' in charge of keeping the peace and interceding out of character with offending players, though they possessed only a socially-vested authority and no real enforcement abilities. Indeed, the popularity of these public events seemed to draw griefers regardless of the venue's location. When a Performers show was held on an island location within a rarely-visited zone, the show managed to attract a group of misbehaving players who stripped down and then walked

around during the show with particularly ostentatious weapons out. On the other hand, the bloodiest (in terms of deaths in player versus player combat) disruption happened during a Performers show held in the Undercity Ruins when some players from the opposing faction came in to cause a fight; the show ended with the ground littered in skeletons. Yet, none of the Performers' player-run markets within the study, which were also held in the Ruins, attracted any grief, though the markets also had a more fluid audience due to the nature of that particular event. Most of the Performers' events, though, attracted little out-of-character trouble.

As such, an attractive venue for an event might be a beautiful or significant one, but also one that encourages players to attend by its convenience relative to how frequently an event was put on.

## Non-Player Characters

All of the venues were themselves devoid of hostile creatures to minimize any disruptions that might be caused by lower-level players being attacked or killed in the middle of an event. However, since many of the events did not take place in friendly locations, and with so many lower-level role-players both working and attending open events, such as the ones that were the focus for this study, many of the organizers also mentioned the role of player guards, already there to help maintain order within the event space amongst the players and characters, to secure these events. These player guards tend to station themselves around the perimeter of a venue or in visually prominent positions.



In the Plainstrider Performers' shows, while there were members from the group who would serve as official guards<sup>5</sup> when in attendance, much of the protection duty was actually taken up by the attending players, who could station themselves in the back and watch the show; often, the players who self-selected for this duty were the ones with combat pets, which they would set on aggressive a short distance back to automatically attack any hostile creatures within the pet's range. The players thus could enjoy the events and still have opportunities to role-play their pets without disrupting the event. For the parade, on the other hand, the organizer had a squad of players riding alongside the parade from the sidelines and clearing hostile creatures near the route, as well as protecting against player-versus-player combat. In both cases, players were quick to work in their actions into their role-play, whether it was assuming the role of an exasperated pet owner trying to control a disobedient pet or a war veteran retiring from active duty to serve as a guard or something else entirely.

When possible, the venues also had few to no friendly non-player characters, or NPCs. Some NPCs, for example, had 'barks', or pieces of scripted dialogue that they would say at certain time intervals; while these barks added flavor to the world, they also added chat spam for role-players during busy events, breaking the narrative flow of a particular event. Others, still, have been set within locations by game designers, set up as props to make the world feel occupied and to reinforce spatial narratives within these locations by portraying a typical scene that would take place there. While these locations have strong narratives, event organizers seemed to avoid these locations in

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<sup>5</sup> These players typically played less as guards and more as the heavy muscle, as thugs, or as pickpockets in-character.

favor of emptier, more flexible locations, which had more room for player characters to occupy without having to maneuver around these NPCs.

As well, these strong narratives also typically inform the intended use of a space or carry the implication of NPC ownership, which can cause difficulties in establishing an alternate frame story for an event or justifying the use of these locations to attending players or characters. Some groups have built elaborate stories to explain their ability to host events in otherwise narratively questionable locations. For example, the Plainstrider Performers have a number of forged documents and permits that they use to justify their show venues, though even when they operated in conjunction with the in-game fair world event, they deliberately set up their shows outside of the main fairground and away from NPCs. For them, the timing and relative proximity of the event offered enough narrative justification for the show's existence. The Nautilus' tavern, on the other hand, has NPCs within the tavern's in-character bounds, but as these NPCs have been positioned within the building or off to the side, they do not typically disrupt the event. Still, the role-players I observed seem to prefer working with locations where spatial narratives have been embedded into the design of the world, rather than trying to explain or work around the presence of unresponsive characters.

## Level Design: Backdrops and Use

Scenery, unsurprisingly, remains important when considering locations in the game world. Organizers noted that scenic locations established the atmosphere for their events and helped players get into the mindset of their characters. Many attendees, in

turn, embraced these venues by working them into in-character reactions and discussions, and even complimenting organizers on their choices out of character, particularly in the case of the Performers' shows, which were hosted at a different location every show. However, whether a location is used for its visual atmosphere, its narrative atmosphere, or both seems to depend largely on the event type and its logistical affordances, as described earlier.

For example, the Plainstrider Performers' markets were worked thematically into their primary venue. An organizer in the Plainstrider Performers noted on the choice of the Ruins of Lordaeron for their market: "The Ruins really show the suffering that Lordaeron has gone through. Why not sell stuff there?" The organizers chose to use the tragic lore embedded within this significant location, as told by the game designers in older games and alluded to within the level design and the ghostly whispers, to their benefit. By turning this spatial narrative on its head, the Performers appropriated this strong existing narrative to create a boisterous, irreverent market that attempted to spark in characters the desire for consumer therapy to best push their goods. This location worked not only because of its logistical affordances but also because attending players could understand the context of the location (if they did not already know) and the stark contrast between the location's history and its use for the event just by looking at the environment. As well, the location allowed the guild to emphasize their in-character mercenary approach, and offered outside vendors and shoppers to react to the location, the premise, and the hosting guild, creating opportunities for role-playing.

## Character Placement

Another consideration when evaluating locations was the spatial organization of the potential venue. Most of the organizers noted that they planned out at least some portion of a venue's layout before the event, though this could happen either at the initial evaluation of a location or right before an event started. During the actual event, though, they did not typically need to explain these layouts to participants; so while the event positioning happened emergently and could (and did) shift during events and through repeated use, the layout often initially resembled the organizers' intentions. Certainly, participants were likely to interpret the situation upon entering the bounds of the venue and then situate themselves according to the type of event and in relation to the position of the organizers, while organizers were careful to park themselves initially as to provide spatial context to participants entering the scene. Entering players needed only to see where other players, particularly the organizers, had positioned their characters to know how to slip their characters into scenes and where they were expected to position themselves – or how to express their characters through their positioning at different venues, though even this language of positioning became ritualized eventually with periodic events such as the Nautilus' tavern nights. With moving or one-time events, where the layout would be less clear, players often looked for the organizers first, or if other participants had already arrived, move to sit near them; players who arrived early would greet the organizers in-character before situating themselves according to the premise of the event. In this way, organizers could establish or restructure the environment to fit their needs as long as participants continued to engage with and

maintain the narrative space that the organizers had conceived. Single or moving events, such as the Performers' shows, had venues that only persisted as long as players remained there, while stationary periodic events had venues that persisted continually for years within the server's role-playing community.

The layout of a venue was not only driven by narrative, but also by the game's mechanics. Players were generally limited to in-character communication through /say (basic text chat) and emotes, both of which are public and therefore broadcast to all players within a certain radius to the same chat window, which can make it difficult for players to keep track of the action and dialogue relevant to them. Within the study, this limitation inevitably forced the venue to be set up in one of two ways.

One option was for each group of interacting characters to distance themselves enough from further groups (to be 'out of earshot') as to minimize the amount of irrelevant conversations received. For example, several players commented on the need for event venues to be "nice and open", allowing room for players to spread out and move around in. With the Nautilus' tavern nights, for example, one player noted that players had chosen to gather within the building itself when the event was first running because the event had been advertised as a tavern. However, the text chat quickly became difficult or impossible to follow with how many interactions tended to move so quickly within the constrained space, so players eventually set up outside instead, giving up the use of tables and chairs to create more flexible circles around campfires and by fences. Four years later, the arrangement at this tavern still holds true. The Plainstrider Performers also opted to hold their shows and markets in the open for much the same

reason, although as one organizer noted, the group ran into problems when they placed their market in the Silvermoon Bazaar. While the location was thematically appropriate for their event and located in a city well-known for its near-constant role-play activity (a ‘hotspot’), the area was wide open with no discernable environmental bounds. As a result, the event had no easily distinguishable boundaries, which led to a lack of cohesion and a feeling of emptiness because players were less likely to overhear and react to relevant activity in the area, such as a vendor hawking the same wares at a lowered price. Additionally, because of the existing activity in the city, the event could not stand out enough to be recognized and attendance dropped until the event was moved back to its original venue.

The other option is to have more rigid forms of interaction, as with the Plainstrider Performers’ shows. The focal point is center stage, where the current act is performing, while the characters in the audience have fanned out in a rough semicircle around the stage, with the sides and back reserved for the performers. Players still tend to bunch their characters roughly with their character’s friends (or social group), distancing themselves slightly from strangers. As in physical theatres, players tend to be quiet during performances, though more talkative groups tend to cluster closer to the sides or back as to avoid disrupting the show for everyone. Often, players will choose their locations by the size of their avatars as well; smaller avatars (such as elves) are more likely to be clumped closer to the front, while larger avatars (such as tauren, the half-bull people) are more likely to be seated on the sides or near the back except if shifted into a smaller form; for example, with the tauren described above, druids might choose to shift

into the smaller cat form or shamans into a translucent wolf form. This trend appeared to be partially in-character, but also partially to be polite and allow others to be able to watch the show as well.

In both kinds of events, players often chose to park themselves “wherever their character would find a place to settle down” as a way of expressing the character and his or her perception of others within a given situation. While places were typically not chosen based on what objects or set pieces were available for use, organizers were keenly aware of the ways in which players often positioned and moved their avatars within a place and kept positioning in mind when deciding how to set up their events. For example, when asked how they determined prop usage, one organizer noted, “If you went to a park with a big statue in the middle and a raised staircase, you’d plop down there instead of the ground.” This statue became the focal point for the Plainstrider Performers’ markets, in part because of its visibility as a landmark, but also because of its popularity amongst players as a place to sit. Similarly, when the Performers hosted a show in the same location later, they picked the landing for the stage rather than the raised base of the statue. This was partially done because the landing was more elevated than the base of the statue and offered more space to performers, but likely also because the base of the statue appeared to be a more natural place to sit.

In shows, the starting seating arrangement tended to persist through the entire event, aside from the performers, but in most other events, characters often moved around as their involvement in various plots or the event itself shifted about. “People,” one organizer commented, “move and talk and walk and shout, just like anyone in the real

world does”; so, too, do the reasons for moving about appear similar while involved with the scene, or the in-character action at a venue. Much of the time, players opted to park their avatars on steps when available, or against fences or walls, until such time as the character felt the need to step forward to take on more of an active role in the scene or was stepping out-of-character and bowing out of the scene.

## Cases of Spatial Appropriation

In this section, I present several events and venues that I observed during this study; this by no means includes all of the locations, or all of the events, that comprised this study. The market and shows were hosted by the Plainstrider Performers, and the tavern by the Nautilus. The first two events shown were held in the same venue location, while the last two merely took place in the same sub-zone.



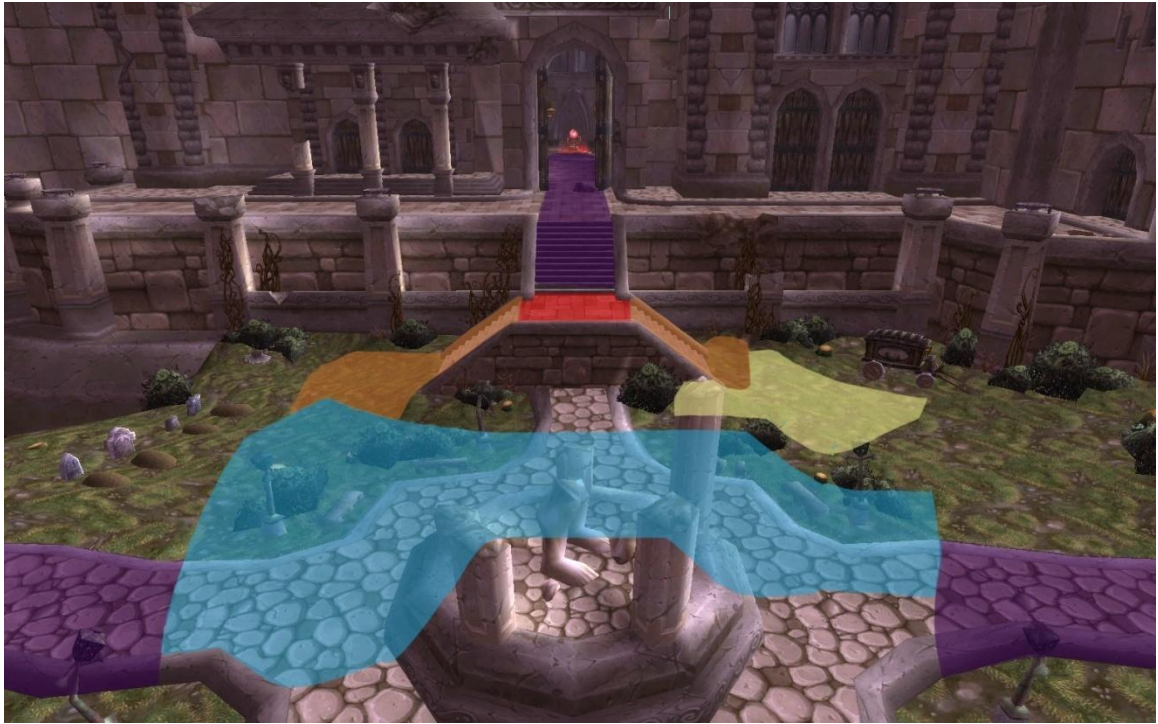
## Market: Ruins



**Figure 2: Undercity Market layout: points of entry (purple), vendor 'stalls' (red), byplay areas (green), and the market streets (blue), which customers move through.**

The Plainstrider Performers held a “When-We-Feel-Like-It” player-run market in the ruins above the Undercity, one of main cities in the game. While the ruins saw a significant amount of traffic as a major thoroughfare, the location was both devoid of non-player characters and a significant landmark within the *Warcraft* lore. Centrally placed within the location, player vendors shaped the area by how they positioned themselves while hawking their goods to the constant flow of shoppers. Unlike some of the group’s other events, the market’s premise allowed for less structured forms of interaction, which was reflected in the shifting nature of the venue’s layout. Often, the layout of a market would drift to one side as the evening went on and vendors moved over to more active spots; characters rarely remained stationary for the entire event.

## Show: Ruins



**Figure 3: Layout of the Undercity Ruins show, organized into the stage (red), stage wings (orange), audience area (blue), points of entry (purple), and backstage (yellow).**

In this event, the Performers decided to try hosting a show in the same Ruins as their markets; previously, they had only used the ruins for these markets with great success (as in the above section), but in using this location for the show, the organizers moved the focus – and with it the venue – to the landing on one side of the ruins to take advantage of a wider stage space, while the audience was situated in front of the landing and on the pedestal in the center of the location. This location was also one of the most accessible venues; as a result, the location both attracted several passers-by, though even those passing through took care to move around the venue rather than through it.

## **Show: Moonglade**

Moonglade is an old and peaceful forest ringed by steep mountains that has remained unscathed throughout the world's turbulent history. For thousands of years, an organization of druids dedicated to the protection and preservation of nature have lived and cared for this forest, but it was only recently been opened up as a neutral haven for all druids to train and learn. For all of its lore, Moonglade is relatively desolate most of the year; access is limited to druids through a teleportation spell, a flightpath that can be activated after a player travels to the zone by foot or spell, and by foot via a tunnel of hostile creatures, though Moonglade itself has no hostile creatures and no real content. During the study, this zone saw the most use for druid-centered events, since druids could travel there easily. Most players, though, typically have little to no reason to visit this place except during the Lunar Festival, where players can obtain a temporary teleportation scroll to the forest upon completing a quest. This developer-made festival transforms the region once a year for a couple weeks, offering activities, special vendors



**Figure 4: Plainstrider Performers show in Moonglade**

for novelty goods, and hostile creatures in one corner of the zone for a quest.

The show pictured above was held in Moonglade in honor of the Lunar Festival, which was active at the time of the show. This particular location was chosen as the venue due to its proximity to the teleport landing for the festival and the roads leading to the town, where the special vendors and quest-givers were located, and to the summoned boss associated with the event. As such, the venue was easy to find, though the Performers also provided summons to their attendees to better facilitate travel, particularly for those who had forgotten to complete the quest before the start of the show.

Of particular note in this performance was the use of props, particularly those specific to the in-game holiday running at the time, both for flavor and to direct audience attention to the current act. For example, in the above screenshot, one of the organizers used a moonstone to illuminate the emcee, who was introducing the first act, with a makeshift, stationary spotlight; this became a trend as organizers took turns setting these lights when possible<sup>6</sup> on the active performer or performers, helping to focus the attention of the audience on the front of the stage. On one act, the members of the audience even joined in with their own moonstones after some of the organizers had set several lights simultaneously, startling the performing character. As well, the organizers paired the spotlight with a shower of rose petals on characters performing serious or melodramatic acts on stage, such as a poetry reading, to enhance performances and temporarily affect

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<sup>6</sup> In practice, lights were used at the beginning of every act but were not always kept up for the entirety of a performance. This also worked because most of the acts did not involve walking around the stage area, and thus would not be taken out of the spotlight until the act finished.



the venue's atmosphere. As well, before the start of the show, the organizers passed out free fireworks to attendees; at the end of the event, organizers then set up several rocket launchers between the audience and the stage and invited everyone to come up and set off fireworks in conjunction with the dance party.

The in-character venue space was bounded by roads on two sides and by trees and a lake on the remaining sides. Within the venue, however, the environment offered little distinguishing characteristics with which to divide the space into the audience frame, the focus (stage) frame, and the backstage frame. In the end, the uneven ground helped attending players figure out where to settle down initially, while the clusters of avatars that emerged by the start of the event solidified the shape of these frames. However, since the organizers were clustered in what became the backstage space beyond the stage, the distance between the stage and the audience ended up significantly closer than in other

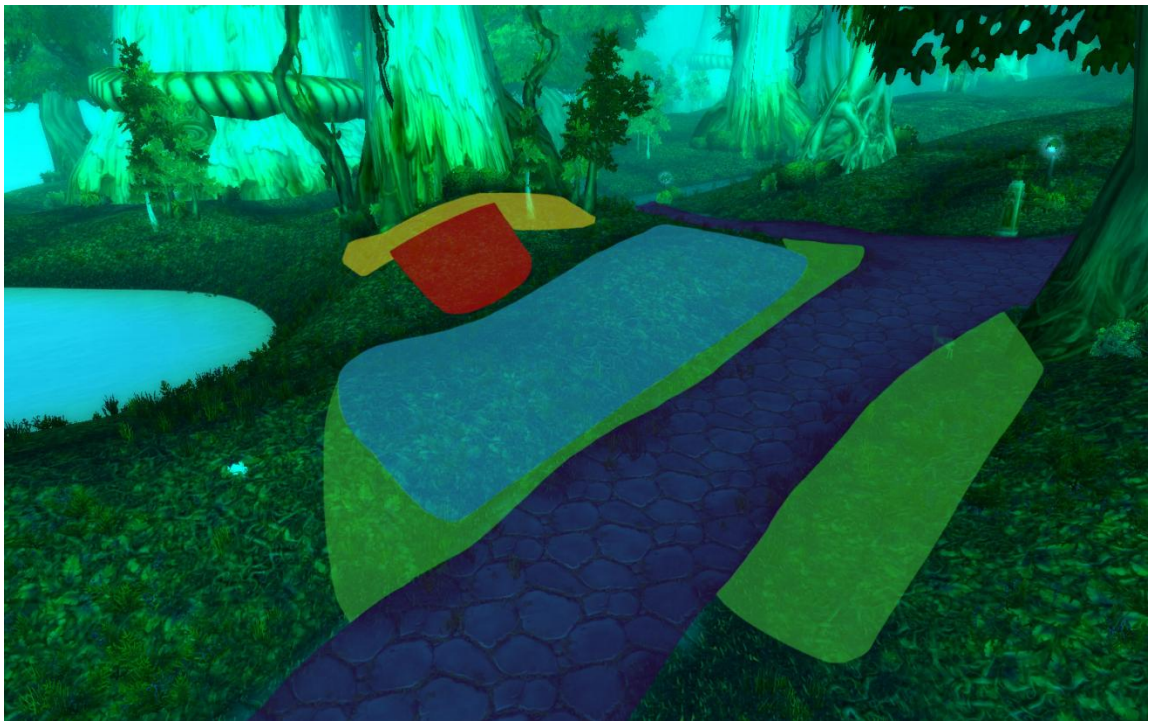


Figure 5: The basic layout of the venue consisted of the audience area (blue), the stage (red), the

**covert audience area (green), and the backstage area (yellow).**

shows as players arranged themselves in relation to the organizers' then-current position.

One attending player even made it a point to have his character catch on fire during the show when he sat too close during the fire-breathing performance, causing the character to run into the nearby lake to put himself out. However, because of the narrow

dimensions of this venue, the organizers set up their backstage area behind the stage by the tree instead of along the sides as in their other shows. As such, the spotlight also

helped focus the audience's attention on the active performer instead of the row of characters standing several feet behind. Other organizers patrolled behind the audience area as guards and janitors, reinforcing the outer bound of the general audience space.

Unlike other shows, though, a few players chose to watch this event from across the road.

These characters were in-character, but for narrative reasons, chose to sit apart from the rest of the audience, despite occasionally missing out on the show itself by being out of earshot of the active performers.

## Show: Ratchet



**Figure 6: Ratchet show in progress.**

This Plainstrider Performers show took place at the gallows on the outskirts of Ratchet, a neutral, mercenary town in a low-level area near two major cities. The venue had a very sharp layout, as can be seen in the image above, despite having few environmental bounds but likely because the gallows provided a clear focus for the audience. Despite the unorthodox setting, the gallows worked well as a stage because it resembled one; even when audience members were called to the stage, players opted to walk up the stairs instead of jumping up to the stage from the front.

In particular, this screenshot demonstrates the self-enforced structure through which players organized themselves; indeed, with this particular event, players began to situate their characters before the organizers had stepped on the stage itself to establish the gallows as the focal point. In part, this is likely because the gallows had been used



for a larger event a few months ago, and because the gallows also bore a strong resemblance to a stage. Regardless of the reason, players seemed to acknowledge the presence of bounds around and within the venue space.



**Figure 7: Ratchet show layout, organized into the stage (red), stage wing (orange), audience area (blue), points of entry (purple), byplay areas (green), and backstage (yellow).**



## Tavern: Ratchet



**Figure 8: The Nautilus' tavern layout: typical point of focus (red), makeshift stables (pink), front stoop (yellow), point of entry (purple), byplay areas (green), participant area (blue).**

The Nautilus' tavern uses the Ratchet inn as its venue, but unlike the other periodic events, the layout has evolved over the past four and a half years. The tavern has a broad frame story as an open tavern where characters come to socialize and players come to bring their stories to a public, visible place. Some aspects, such as the makeshift stable for combat pets, here marked in pink, have emerged from the Nautilus' policies, but the multiple layers of interaction embedded into the current layout have emerged from the stories that participants have told and the memories of the role-playing community. This is best seen in the byplay areas (green); as a whole, characters use these areas to step away from the crowds for conversations that characters may intend to be private, but which players do not. These areas serve similar social purposes but different

narrative purposes, however. For example, the green area on the far left is known by players as ‘Emo Hill’ – so called because of the hill’s reputation from its use during these events as a popular brooding spot for characters, including jilted lovers and morally-conflicted soldiers. Players seemed to understand the usefulness of the spot early on in the event’s history; as the organizers noted, an avatar on the hill was visibly prominent within the venue, thus alerting other players to the character’s emotional state, but was far enough away as to be out of the chat radius (‘hearing’) of the rest of the venue. As well, players could use the space to extend invitations to other interested characters to participate in their stories. The area along the fence near the bottom of the image is another byplay area, but one whose use has changed depending on the groups present at the tavern any particular night. While it used to serve as an area for antagonists, in more recent times, various racial groups have congregated there to chat and observe others.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The virtual game world creates enough semblance of a visual world that, augmented with a detailed lore, provides a setting that players can accept as a believable narrative 'reality', within which they can create characters and tell stories to each other, which role-playing events help to facilitate. Yet, as role-playing often selectively displaces these mechanics, these events make use of frames to help guide interactions between characters and reinforce bounds for players, similar to the frames of experience that Goffman and Fine propose. These frames are often determined by the player organizers setting up these events, but may also reinforce emergent frames where appropriate to the event. To establish these events, organizers appropriate the game environment through storytelling to situate the frame and its frame story such that the location fits the event, thus transforming the location into a venue. Its use thus transforms the game space. Thus, what MMOs like *World of Warcraft* lack in player creation and control for role-players, they gain in access to a “[constructed] intentional world”, where the game’s designers have expressed a detailed lore (and within that, a set of values) for their players to experience (Taylor 4). While certainly this is far from a comprehensive study on role-playing and game spaces, it is nonetheless useful to consider the findings of the case study with respect to some of the proposed theories that provided the context for this work.

## Appropriating Game Spaces

The process of creating worlds and stories for role-playing in MMOs differed greatly from other forms of role-playing because of the limitations imposed by the game world. Unlike the Dungeon Master (DM) of a pen-and-paper game or a live action role-play (LARP) game, who operated as storytellers and world-building "gods", or even a moderator in a text-based game or a freeform chat game, the event organizer's role in the events I had observed was more of a facilitator or a host for a social occasion (Fine).

Organizers were unable to change or modify the world or its environment directly, or to moderate the behavior or stories of others, so the guided play present in many types of role-playing were not present. Even with freeform chat role-playing, which MMO role-playing most closely resembles with its emphasis on improvisation and storytelling over rulesets, players involved with role-playing had the ability to suspend and ban other players and to build, set, and change a scene easily through text descriptions (and consequentially lacked a virtual environment) meant that they had more control over their world than players did in MMOs.

Yet, players in MMOs took advantage of the wide range of settings within the game world to use for their events. Many organizers commented on the vistas and how well those environments could establish a narrative atmosphere for participants, or even had level assets to create a particularly memorable experience. For example, one of the Performers commented on choosing a location for a show because of its view of the plains below, and then finding a thick rope, which resulted in a tightrope walking-and-torch-juggling act for that show. As such, rather than crafting a primary story, organizers

sought to create a social safe place for other characters to interact with each other with the event as a convenient explanation for their presence. They took advantage of the existing virtual environment by transforming existing locations through narrative into venues appropriate for these events. Thus, for organizers, it became their responsibility to create a premise, a frame of interaction, inclusive enough to encompass other characters' stories and for characters to interact with each other.

While observing role-playing events, it became clear that players recognized the presence of bounds surrounding the venue space, space which was considered as in-character. The space outside was typically considered out-of-character by players for the event; while players could and did still role-play outside of the venue's bounds, their activities were typically considered as 'away' from the event. This distinction relieved players and their characters of the responsibility of listening and reacting to activities beyond the immediate scope of the event.

These artificial bounds fit in with Turner's concept of the liminoid, the temporary ritual state set apart from the ordinary world for play and creativity, and to a lesser extent, with Salen and Zimmerman's 'magic circle' that bounds video game worlds. Indeed, the MMO game environment presented is itself a liminoid space and bounded by the magic circle. However, these concepts can also be applied to role-playing taking place within these worlds, creating a second liminoid space within the liminoid space of the game. Players create bounds around distinct spaces within which they perform their fictional characters freely, and create and tell stories with other players. The threshold is set into the digital world, where players must move their avatars into the in-character space and situation, together colloquially known as the "scene", to join the narrative and be

acknowledged by the other characters. In practice, by moving an avatar into the venue space, players transitioned from the static digital world into the role-playing event and all fictional modifications or changes associated with the event, as conceived of by the event organizers. This transition, too, has its own ritual attached to it, wherein the incoming player acknowledges her intent to play along with the premise of the event: walking into the scene<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes, if an event was more freeform or if there was not a dramatic or otherwise important moment unfolding, players would emote about the character's entry or a greeting issued as they walked; and sometimes an organizer would stand ready to greet entering characters. For example, with the Nautilus' tavern, one of the organizers made it a point to "hover around near the door [to] walk out to greet folks and be excited" with every character who came to the tavern. Other times, as with the Plainstrider Performers' shows, players entering late usually walked in silently and took a seat near the back to avoid interrupting the show.

The exit ritual works in much the same way: unless a player had to leave due to an out-of-character emergency or the event had ended, players usually chose to walk their avatars out of the scene before running or riding away as they normally would. The action of walking to enter or leave a venue thus facilitates the transition between the in-character state and the out-of-character state for the player, and informs other players of her character's narrative availability within the context of the event. Yet, while the

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<sup>7</sup> Since players are able to run instead with more speed and no penalty, and do so by default, the very act of walking therefore is an intentional choice (and the command is not told to players directly and thus must be found elsewhere), and one that is noticeable to other players. Except when avatars were intentionally running as part of a narrative, all of the observed avatars walked around the venue while in-character.

game's mechanics and rules persist in the game world and thus within the in-character space, players draw from or disregard these mechanics as is useful to the stories they are telling. For example, with the server parade, the organizer planned a route that would be visually interesting and long enough to fit the timeframe of the event. However, this route also wound through a higher-level zone, which took low-level participants out of the zones they were supposed to be in and into more hazardous areas. To compensate for the risk of participants dying during the parade, he recruited a team of enforcers to clear the areas surrounding the parade route of hostile mobs. I also observed many players on both servers who chose to play roles other than the classes or specializations that the game offered during character creation, or had stronger or weaker (in terms of game levels) character than what their in-game statistics suggested. As a result, the concept of magic circle, which emphasizes the importance of rules in constructing the bounds of play, is less relevant here when applied to role-playing scenes.

When possible, players used the design of the level for their bounds, including fences, bushes, bodies of water, and buildings. One example is the Nautilus' tavern, which features a fence running along one side and the building of the tavern opposite it; on the other two sides, the area is bounded by hills and other buildings, opening up only for a path that runs through the location. The venue thus has environmental assets available to clearly establish its bounds. However, these bounds can exist even without visible demarcations in the environment, though more loosely and with more trouble. A couple organizers, for instance, noted that one of the old venues that they had tried had been rejected because the location was an open space in a busy city with no visible bounds to separate the event from the activity of non-participants around them.

Particularly with events that lacked a consistent focus point, player groups often situated themselves away from each other so far (in an attempt to avoid chat spam) as to not be distinguishable as a part of a larger event.

As a participant, the player voluntarily involves her character with the event and opens her character up to interaction with other characters at the event, but this transition often only occurs or is recognized after the avatar walks into the scene. The act of entering a venue thus indicates a transition from an individual player controlling her character freely into a character participant at the event. During the observed events, role-players seemed to interpret certain areas within the venue as points of entry; when entering or leaving, they would walk in and out of these areas, and acknowledge other characters as they walked in to bring them into the frame narrative. These points of entry, which players move through with their avatars to 'step' in-character, are transitional spaces that establish the border around and allow entry into the liminoid space of the venue. Salen and Zimmerman's concept of the "magic circle" is also useful to consider here, since players are constructing and revising the event and its bounds as they choose to enter or leave and to contribute -- to play along (95). The venue thus becomes a playground in much the same way, though one that is more focused on exploring and creating stories.

In my observations, many of the actual 'play' aspects within the actual game where role-playing takes place in were often ignored entirely or only selectively used when it could be used to enhance a story. Yet, during these role-playing events, there are a number of social rules (or expectations) that guide in-character interactions within the bounds of a venue to help maintain the integrity of the created social world. These rules



vary depending on the type of event, often modeled on relevant social situations in real life, and the individual policies of the event organizers; but regardless of the specifics, the rules allow organizers to establish the social and virtual space for the fictional venue by defining acceptable forms of interaction. For example, the Nautilus maintained a no-dueling policy on the premises while the tavern was officially open. Practically, that particular policy was in place to maintain a civil, inviting atmosphere at the tavern, which sat in contrast to the theme of conflict and war prevalent in the game (being the *World of Warcraft*), and constrained interaction to 'spoken' words and non-combative emotes.

Locations chosen as role-playing venues are bounded by what is in-character and what is out-of-character, as can be addressed by the concepts of liminality and the magic circle. Often, players use the structure of the environment to determine the in-character space, but sometimes the narrative can also be bound by the positioning of the participating characters within the location. Yet, while this addresses how role-players conceive of the bounds of their activities, it does not address the fluidity of roles that typically appears in freeform role-playing such as in MMOs, or the spatial divisions within a venue that emerge from this role-shifting. Not every character is equal at all points during the narrative of an event; characters often stepped up to or moved away from the focus area depending on the situation, though event organizers at open events often tried to open up opportunities for other participating (but currently observing) characters to join in the narrative when appropriate. With controlled events, such as the Plainstrider Performers' shows, the primary narrative remained on the stage, and performing characters (with the help of the emcee) would pass on access to the characters performing the next act, or control general access to the stage through the narrative, such

as with a call for volunteers during a fortune-telling act.

With private scenes, containment can be restricted to controlled text chat through different channels, as covered in an earlier chapter. With public scenes, where communication is more open, the broadcast limit for text chat helped to establish an artificial limitation, but players took advantage of environmental bounds and avatar positioning to create a visual reinforcement for smaller group events (i.e. sitting in a circle) or for smaller cliques within public events (i.e. clustering within the bounds of the role-play scene.)

From my observations, the shift in roles and focus is reflected in how characters position themselves within a venue. These distinctions are, however, social in nature; Goffman's concept of frames offers a way to consider how to map these different roles, and in particular, how players convey their role and their level of involvement during an event through their positioning within that venue. Positioning, then, is a mode of expression that is conveyed strictly through the virtual game world. With an event, the venue is bounded by a frame to establish the event's premise, and represents the in-character space covered earlier; while the frame exists outside of the game environment, the presence of this environment allows players to project these frames onto spaces within that environment, dependent on how the space has been used. This frame, in turn contains several smaller frames that are situated within the venue and represent different levels of interaction: the foci of narrative attention, the entering/leaving frames, and the observation frames. These areas can be further divided into more specific categories of interaction on the group level and more internal separation of roles on the personal level, as is proposed by Goffman's concept, but both of these can quickly become complicated.

These frames are situated within the game world. When possible, players will take advantage of notable features or landmarks within venues to provide visual cues to players and characters as to its use and bounds, such as along fences or in the center of an open area. Players navigated these situated frames without requiring an explanation as to its current use; one organizer described character positioning as a decision that felt "natural" to the situation – one that mirrored the ways in which individuals and groups used and interpreted environments in the physical world. The statue platform in the center of the ruins, for example, proved to be a popular sitting place for participants regardless of the event. The ruins also had a flat raised ledge along two sides that worked especially well as a stage opposite the statue; because of these features in the environment, the location lent itself to a particular layout and usage.



**Figure 9: Players were already seating themselves before the Performers' show in the ruins. On the left is the raised platform (mirrored on the other side of the ruins); on the right is the statue**

**platform, which served as the main audience seating area.**

With the Performers' shows, which had a fairly rigid interaction model, the observation frame for the audience fanned in a semicircle around the focus frame, which was the stage. Another observation frame was at the wings of the stage, though the characters there were the in-character event organizers, including performers yet to come on and backstage help, and therefore did not fulfill the same role as the audience did in the other observation frame. Indeed, while the backstage characters can watch both the show and the audience, the characters in the audience typically can see (or are expected to see) only the stage and not the backstage areas, even if the player can see them clearly, as was usually the case. Channels of communication at these were set up to mirror this arrangement; the backstage characters had their own in-character and out-of-character communication to coordinate acts and delegate tasks, while the audience shared the public channels (/say) with the current act.



**Figure 10: A shot of the parade winding through Stranglethorn Vale.**

Depending on the event, these frames can move around and even swap places within the virtual environment with other frames, following the narrative action as it moves through the movement of characters during the event. In the study, this was most apparent with events that are mobile in nature, such as the parade, where the entire venue consisted of the occupied part of the road and the area surrounding that part of the road (for the player guards) but as the characters proceeded along the parade route, the frame was also moving forward along the road, which operated as the venue. The frames themselves remained in place within the frame of the venue, but the venue was also moving until it reached its destination, after which the frames (and the roles the players adopted) shifted to fit the new location. As well, while the focal frame of a scene typically remained in the same relative positioning within the venue, it too could shift or flicker within the space depending on the attention of the characters at the event.

Interestingly enough, when the focal frame was situated by a venue's exit, players seemed more reluctant to have their characters leave while the event's focus remained there; if they chose to leave anyway, the exit was typically emoted with an acknowledgement of the situation occurring there at the time.

The model of frames captures the division of space through the roles that characters typically adopt in a part of a location, which is evident in MMO role-playing. While it works for rigid events or a snapshot of an event, this model remains too inflexible to cover most role-playing events, where players (and their characters) can move fluidly from role to role or occupy multiple roles simultaneously. Fine address the constant movement in frames as oscillating levels of engrossment while role-playing. Mackay (citing Schechner) counters that while frames assume the possibility of multiple frames of reference but only one possible active one, performance -- such as with role-playing -- and experience exist on all frames, and that the ritual of play transcends these frames (63). Thus, he proposes porous spheres to model these different levels of expression, defined as narrative (storytelling), play (game mechanics), and acting (performance) within the context of role-playing, which together comprise the performance of a character. These spheres can be interpreted in MMO role-playing as well, though only elements of these sphere applied to the format at all, and in a more limited fashion when examining these spheres with respect to game environments. The spatial language conveyed through positioning, as has been discussed earlier, is one sphere of performance, but players (through their characters) engage with the environment in other spheres as well. Many organizers, for example, drew inspiration from locations when establishing the mood and context of a scene; these locations served

as settings, providing atmosphere through its visuals and context through the lore (history) behind the location and the objects and figures currently set in the location. As well, given a three-dimensional space and an avatar within the space, players took advantage of items, abilities, and the construction of the environment itself to enhance their stories and, in the case of organizers, direct player attention. While the Performers made ample use of moonbeams in their shows as spotlights, the organizers of the Nautilus maintained a campfire in the same place every night they were open, creating a new one as the effect wore off. These campfires symbolized an open invitation to characters and players to come and participate at the tavern events, and provided a welcoming place for characters to sit by, particularly for newer players. Both of these items served similar functions, but were chosen for their appropriateness to the event in question.





**Figure 11: Props in the game; campfire (left) and moonbeam (right).**

As a whole, the role-playing events observed as part of this work can be separated into two types of events, which are here called directed and undirected. Basic patterns of spatial use emerge from these event models, which are projected and fitted into various locations depending on the purpose of the event, as is detailed further below. With both models, however, the points of entry that players used to enter these venues remained consistent across events, as exemplified with the two events held in the Ruins; this suggests that players are more likely to determine points of entry based on the structure of the environment (e.g. the presence of roads) rather than by the structure of the event itself.



## Directed Events

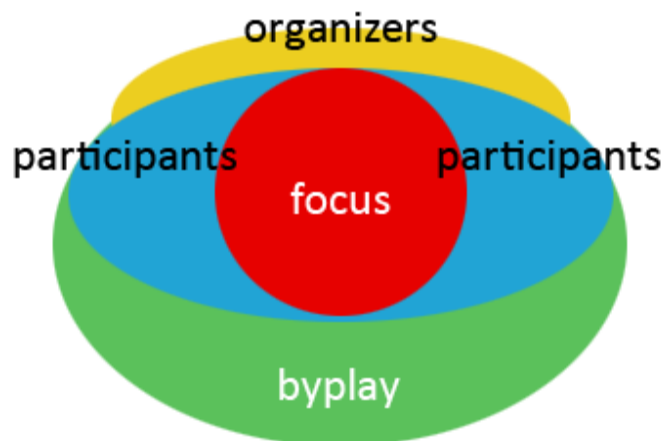


**Figure 12: Generalized layout of a directed event.**

In a directed event, the event organizers have planned in advance for guided activities, which take place within the focus space; the Performers' shows and the server parade are two examples of these events. Because the purpose of these events was typically to entertain, organizers often set up the layout of the location such that the focus space would be visible and clearly distinct from the rest of the area. As well, since other players were conscious of their role as attendees or passive participants from the premise of the event, they often entered and positioned their characters in relation to the organizers such as to have a better view without interfering or obstructing the event itself. The participants' positioning within the venue reflected this differentiation in roles between organizers and participants, and the projection of frames into the venue area. Figure 12 provides a generalized layout, as observed in other directed events; here, the focus is both the center of the attention and the separator between the organizer frame

and the participant frame, similar to how a stage separates a backstage area from the audience. As well, the focus frame is situated not in the center but off to one side, while the participant frame is situated opposite it to establish distance between the active performer(s) and the audience. For example, with the Performers' shows, the organizers made use of elevation changes between the focus frame and the other frames to draw attention to the stage; audience members were more likely to sit back far enough to give the performers space and to have a better view of the stage space.

## Undirected Events



**Figure 13: Generalized layout of an undirected event.**

In an undirected event, the organizers establish a premise for the event but do not plan specific activities ahead of time; instead, they facilitate participant-created plots and activities, and serve as a moderating presence during the event. Events such as the Performers' markets, the Nautilus' tavern nights, and the druid meetings fall into this undirected category. These events are typically more focused on social interaction between participants, while the focus of these events depends on participant activity; while dramatic occurrences were often observed to be brought into the center of the

venue, such as with challenges or impromptu storytelling, the focus frame is may move around in this model, as opposed to the more rigid structure in directed events.

Discussions in the byplay area have become the focus when the situation warranted the attention; for example, with the Nautilus' tavern, one of the byplay areas was popular with antagonists, and thus would periodically become the focus frame when a dramatic confrontation escalated beyond what the surrounding characters could reasonably ignore. Similarly, without a single individual or group to concentrate on, the focus frame often shifts and is shared amongst all of the players. One particularly obvious example of this tendency was the druid meetings, where the characters organized themselves in a circle and took turns bringing up and discussing various matters, as moderated by the organizer.

## On Successful Locations

In the section above, I have addressed the ways in which players appropriate game spaces for role-playing. But what makes a location a successful venue for public role-playing events? In interviews, organizers noted that, when considering potential venues, they looked at accessibility, non-player character presence (unoccupied spaces), aesthetics and lore, and spatial structure (level design). The locations that saw the most use across both servers, though, had strikingly similar traits: the Ruins and Ratchet both stood out as popular locations to use as venues due to their proximity to two major cities each, the relative lack of non-player characters (intrusive or otherwise), the presence of clear environmental bounds, and their unique environmental features. The last trait, which includes features such as the gallows in Ratchet and the crumbling architecture in

the Ruins, distinguishes exceptional and frequently-used venues from other available locations. While not every location likely should be outstanding, the presence of such spaces within the environment greatly aids organizers in their search for viable venues, as well as role-players as a whole. While the simplest solution is merely to add more empty spaces, as one Blizzard developer has noted, merely adding more empty areas does not address the issue because the same areas would “appear as unfinished, wasted space” to those who do not role-play and would go unused on non-role-playing servers.

Furthermore, the design of spaces suitable for role-playing is complicated within *World of Warcraft* because of the game’s use of phased instances embedded into the open world. This feature allows developers to create more elaborate narrative experiences in which players can affect the world according to a script set out within developer-written questlines, but can also prevent players in the same space from ever seeing one another when not on the same part of a storyline. However, provided that locations exist within the world, especially population centers, which have not been phased, this issue can be minimized. One possible, if inelegant, solution within existing worlds would be to set aside more potential venues that are accessible and viable with minimal to no barks (speaking lines) from non-player characters positioned around the perimeter of the location. More importantly, players – and organizers in particular – are often seeking locations that can be easily read and used through the cues provided by the environment. This can be terrain designed in such a way as to divide a large space into a more manageable area, as with the small rise by the tavern that became ‘Emo Hill’ or with the small island in the middle of a lake that served as a show venue; these cues can also be objects placed within the world to bound spaces or which can be used as set pieces for

players to express their characters by and through which game designers can convey atmosphere and narrative, such as with the statue in the middle of the Ruins. As such, another broader application of this study for MMO game developers seeking to encourage role-playing events or social gatherings in general, is to design virtual environments with embedded cues that express spatial narratives and bounds and divisions into the environment to better facilitate the appropriation of in-game locations for both directed and undirected event models. In this way, a location may serve multiple functions without needing to be completely empty or purposeless when not in use.

## Further Inquiries

The question of role-playing and game environments is part of a much larger research question about how and why people approach role-playing within MMOs. Below are a few possible extensions that emerged from the research itself.

These projected frames help players distinguish between in-character and out-of-character spaces. However, the concept of frames, as Goffman and Fine have defined it, was originally used to distinguish the separation of experience for the individual. This concept only variably applies to the perception of bounds between a player and her character within MMO role-playing, however. For the individual player, the line between her perception of herself and her character may be reinforced by the affordances of a virtual world. Indeed, having an avatar moving around in a virtual world adds another level of abstraction between the player and the character, since the interaction for the character is constrained to the avatar's movement and text chat, reinforcing the border

between what is in-character and what is out-of-character. But because the player can only see and interact with the avatars representing other characters and not the players behind them, perceiving the difference in others between in-character and out-of-character when interacting with other characters can be more difficult. As such, the perceived line between other players and their characters can be blurred because all interaction has been abstracted away from the physical space; much of this, as some organizers noted, can be attributed to individual player attitudes. The topic, however, is beyond the scope of this work, though it certainly warrants further investigation.

During the course of this research, I had the opportunity to talk to many event organizers about how they each approached their role-playing events and their motivations for organizing them. Out of those discussions, I discovered that many organizers often downplayed their characters or, if the character was in the role of entertainer, set aside their stories. Both of these were done to highlight attending characters and those characters' stories, which organizers viewed as necessary to fulfill the larger goal of their events: to facilitate role-playing by providing locations and reasons for characters to meet and mingle with each other. The latter is particularly important, as these events often served as entry points into the role-playing community as a whole by bringing in both older and newer players together, though organizers also acknowledged the difficulty in managing events as to not overwhelm newer players due to the speed at which the text chat typically scrolls. Regardless, organizers seemed to be involved in a different activity than the role-players participating in the event; their attitudes toward providing an enjoyable experience mirrored that of dungeon masters, but their activities partly resembled that of a moderator's (minimizing out-of-character

interruptions and mediating disagreements) and partly that of a party host within the physical world (organizing social occasions, typically within pre-existing venues, to provide a social safe place for interaction). Again, this is beyond the scope of this work, but is open to further inquiry.

Beyond expanding upon this research in the ways detailed above, one potential application of this work is to consider how to better facilitate this narrative play and how to give players more expressive and flexible tools to perform and tell stories to and with each other. This can perhaps provide one way to provide players with engaging play while allowing developers to create a rich narrative world as well, while offering a solution (one, as seen in this study, based on existing player activities) to help mitigate issues with the current content pipeline issues.

Ultimately, players cannot meaningfully affect the world through their actions unless the game only has one instance of the world for all of its players, such as with *EVE Online*, whose player-organized events do not necessarily take place within the same area and can even span days as opposed to hours. As well, *EVE* players are represented within the game environment by the ships they pilot within space; as a result, the event models do not apply as well to this (and similar) games. However, the event models presented here can likely be extended to other MMOs and virtual worlds that make use of avatars within a three-dimensional virtual environment when considering both role-playing events and social events as a whole. These models can also be useful to consider when designing social spaces in these worlds. Within a game like *World of Warcraft*, the extent of an event's impact is limited to the portion of a community it can reach. Yet, these events, and the players who run them, make an effort to continue their events

because they do bring together the players and characters within a server's community, and thereby help to set apart the identity and world of one server from another through narrative.



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